



Retaining Benefits, Avoiding Responsibility¹

by Paul Kivel

IN THE UNITED STATES, PEOPLE OF COLOR experience acts of violence such as rape, battery, economic discrimination, lack of police protection, police brutality, poor health care, and housing and job discrimination due to racism. There is no time that a person of color is immune to harassment, discrimination, or the possibility that she or he will be attacked. Money and other accoutrements of power afford some protection, but not completely and not always.

During the first few years that I worked with men who are violent, I was continually perplexed by their inability to see the effects of their actions and by their ability to deny the violence they had done to their partners or children. I only slowly became aware of the complex set of tactics that men use to make violence against women invisible and to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. These tactics are listed below in the rough order that men employ them.

List of Tactics to Avoid Responsibility

<u>Tactic</u>	<u>Typical Statement</u>
Denial	“I didn’t hit her.”
Minimization	“It was only a slap.”
Blame	“She asked for it.”
Redefinition	“It was mutual combat.”
Unintentionality	“Things got out of hand.”
It’s over now	“I’ll never do it again.”
It’s only a few men	“Most men wouldn’t hurt a woman.”
Counterattack	“She controls everything.”
Competing victimization	“Everybody is against men.”

¹ Adapted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 1996 rev 2002.



These tactics are part of a cycle in which these claims, particularly those of blame, counterattack, and competing victimization, lead to a justification of further violence.

As the battered women's movement tried to bring the prevalence and destructiveness of male violence to national attention, it became clear that these tactics were used not only by individual men, but were also in general use in our society to avoid naming and responding to male violence.

As I began to understand the interconnection between the systems of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, I came to see how these tactics are used, consciously and unconsciously, by those in power to cover over the violence that is directed toward groups of people with less power. These are not gender-specific tactics. They are the tactics of those who seek to retain their power and the privileges they have accrued.

Although these tactics follow a logical progression from outright denial to competing victimization, they are often used in combinations that make it confusing to argue against them. It is important to remember that although they appear as logical reasoning, all of the tactics are part of a strategy for explaining or justifying *already existing* injustice and violence.

We can learn to recognize and counter these tactics. I am going to use the history of the relationship between white Europeans and Native Americans to illustrate how these tactics have been (and still are) used to cover up the violence that white people commit toward people of color. There is more detailed information about that history in Part IV in the section on Native Americans in my book *Uprooting Racism*. A brief summary here will have to suffice.

Denial

Denial is usually the first tactic employed and works very simply. The batterer says, "I didn't hit her."

European Americans say that Columbus was just looking for a trade route, the Pilgrims found a vast wilderness, and the early colonists befriended the Indians and exchanged presents with them. At this level there is absolute denial that violence occurred and therefore of any responsibility for it.



Today we are using the tactic of denial when we say, “It’s a level playing field,” “Discrimination is a thing of the past,” or “This is a land of equal opportunity.”

Minimization

If the denial doesn’t hold up because of the evidence—for instance, the victim has a broken arm—then the violence is minimized. The batterer says, “I didn’t hit her. Well, it was only a slap.”

Native Americans were killed and their land taken. In response we say, “A few Indians died because they didn’t have immunity to European diseases.” We try to minimize the presence of the 12 to 15 million Native Americans in North America prior to 1492 and to minimize the violence we committed against them.

Today we continue to minimize racism by saying, “Personal achievement mostly depends on personal ability,” “Racism isn’t prevalent anymore,” or (about slavery) “There were a lot of kind slave owners.”

Blame

If the minimization doesn’t hold up because the victim is in the hospital, then the batterer’s effort shifts to a combination of justifying the violence and blaming the victim. “She asked for it.” “She should have known not to say that to me.” If the discussion is more general, then men might make statements like “Women are too emotional/manipulative/backstabbing.”

Similarly, we know that millions of Native Americans died, not only from intentional transmission of diseases, but also from being shot, tortured, and enslaved. Since the blame has to fall on entire societies, we make statements like “Indians were primitive.” “They had not developed the technology to compete.” “They were not physically able to resist the diseases, hold up under slavery [they didn’t make good slaves!].” “They were naïve, simple, heathens.”

These justifications rely on a series of biological and psychological justifications for the abuse. Historically there have been continual attempts to “explain” away white violence against people of color as the inevitable result of genetic, biological, chemical, physiological, or psychological differences. These differences often do not exist. Where they do, they are seldom related to real differences in behavior. In any case, they never justify injustice



and violence. What they do is shift the focus from the perpetrators of violence to the victims, subtly blaming them for being inferior or vulnerable to violence.

When we describe what happened in terms of the agency of the person or people with power, the uses of these explanations become clearer. He hit her. He broke her arm. He put her in the hospital. Columbus invaded, killed, enslaved, and tortured the Taino/Arawak peoples. The U.S. Army at Fort Clark deliberately distributed smallpox-infected blankets to the Mandan in order to kill them.²

Today we blame people of color for racism by saying, “Look at the way they act,” “If they weren’t so angry ...,” or “They are immoral, lazy, dumb, or unambitious.”

Redefinition

We want to hold adults responsible for what they do. Therefore we must carefully and accurately investigate what happened so that we can stop violence. If we don’t look at the overall context and take differentials of power into account, we can be susceptible to the tactic of redefinition. For example, a batterer says, “It was mutual combat.” “She hit me first.” “It takes two to fight.”

If we can no longer claim that Columbus simply and innocently discovered America, we try to redefine that event too. The 1992 quincentennial museum exhibit in New York was called “Encounter,” a word implying some level of mutuality, equality, and neutrality. In the same vein we say, “The settlers had to protect themselves from Indian attacks.”

Today we redefine racism as a mutual problem by saying, “This country is just a big melting pot,” “Anybody can be prejudiced,” or “People of color attack white people too.”

It Was Unintentional

At this point in the battle the group or individual with more power, who has clearly done something that resulted in some kind of devastation, might claim that the damage was unintentional and therefore their responsibility was minimal. The batterer says things such as “I didn’t intend to hit her.” “I didn’t mean to hit her so hard.” “Things got out of hand.”

² Churchill, Ward. *Indians Are Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), p. 35.



First of all, claims of innocence by someone who has hurt someone else are always suspect. Adults are responsible for their actions and for the results of those actions. “I didn’t mean to” is not an acceptable legal or moral excuse for being violent toward another person. Secondly, actual intent is often discernible from the pattern of action of the perpetrators of violence. When a man systematically tries to control a woman and then says, “I didn’t mean to hit her,” he is saying that he hoped to control her by non-physical means. When all else failed, he resorted to hitting. The issue is power and control. Intent is clearly evident in the entire pattern of behavior.

We have said that the near-eradication of Native Americans and their food supplies, hunting areas, and natural resources was the unintended result of European immigration. We now know that the complete elimination of Native Americans from the United States was government policy as well as part of the general, everyday discourse of white Americans.

Today we continue to claim racism is unintentional by saying, “Discrimination may happen, but most people are well-intentioned.” “She probably didn’t mean it like that.” “It was only a joke.”

It’s All Over Now

Another way to defuse responsibility is by claiming that the violence happened in the past and is no longer an issue. The batterer says, “It’s over with” or “I’ll never do it again.” He may finally claim responsibility (often indirectly), but he asserts that things have changed. Part of his claim is that the effects of the violence are similarly in the past and shouldn’t influence us anymore. The trauma, pain, mistrust, fear, disrespect, and vulnerability should just be forgotten. This discounts the seriousness of the violence, blames the survivor for not being able to let go of it and move on, and focuses on the perpetrator’s words, not his actions. All we have is his promise that it won’t happen again.

White people often claim that genocide, land grabbing, and exploitation are things of the past. Most of our images of Indians reinforce that belief by focusing on Native Americans who lived 100 to 300 years ago. The reality is that the effects of colonial violence are still readily apparent today. The small number of remaining Native Americans, the poor economic conditions, the



alcoholism, the shattered traditions and devastated communities are the direct result of 500 years of systematic oppression.

Furthermore, the same policies are in play today as they were hundreds of years ago. The violence did not magically stop at some point. White civilization did not back off and allow the Native nations to heal and recover. Across the country, land is still being taken; treaties are still being broken; Native culture, religion, and artifacts are still being stolen and/or exploited; Native American nations are still denied sovereignty; Native Americans are still being killed by whites with some degree of impunity; and their land, including their sacred sites, is still being exploited and laid waste on a massive scale. Some of the violence takes different forms than it did a hundred years ago. It is important that we not use those differences to claim that we are not responsible for the violence that occurs today, or to blame Native Americans for the results of violence that white people committed in the past and continue to commit today. When we are dealing with structural violence, the proof of change is structural change, not claims of innocence.

Today we claim racism is all over by saying, “Slavery was over a long time ago.” “The days of land grabbing are long gone.” “That was before the civil rights era.” “There aren’t any Indians left.”

It’s Only a Few People

If we are unable to maintain that the violence was all in the past, we may switch to another tactic to make a current situation seem isolated. We might say that it’s really only a few people who are like that—it is not systemic or institutionalized. In the case of domestic violence, we contend that only a few men are batterers; most men treat women well. However, if almost 25 percent of all women in the U.S. are battered (overwhelmingly by men)—at least 1-2 million such incidents a year—then we are clearly talking about a social issue, not the isolated anger of a few men.³

Similarly, it wasn’t just rogue officers like Custer disobeying orders, or cruel, greedy men like Columbus, or a few cowboys who killed Native Americans. Slavery, genocide, and racism were built into the structure of all the institutions of our society and were everyday occurrences. We have inherited, perpetuated, and benefited from these actions. All of us are implicated.

³ Reuters. “Quarter of U.S. Women Suffer Domestic Violence: CDC.” Feb. 7, 2008
<http://www.reuters.com/article/healthNews/idUSN0737896320080207> (accessed Feb. 27, 2008.)



Today we continue to use this tactic when we say, “Housing and job discrimination are the result of a few bigoted people.” “The Far Right is behind the scapegoating of immigrants.” “It’s only neo-Nazis and Skinheads who do that sort of thing.”

Counterattack and Competing Victimization

When all else fails and responsibility for the violence is inexorably falling on the shoulders of those who committed the acts themselves, there is a counterattack, an attempt to claim a reversal of the power relationships. This approach is usually combined with the final tactic, competing victimization. An individual batterer might say, “She really has all the power in our family.” “If I didn’t hit her she would run all over me.” On a national level there are more and more claims that women batter men too, that women win child custody and men don’t when divorce occurs, and that there is too much male-bashing.

To counter this tactic, we must go back to what happened, who has power, and what violence is being done. Who ended up in the hospital, and who remained in control of the family resources? In the claims above we find that in 90-95 percent of domestic violence cases a woman is the victim of a pattern of abuse, and in 5-10% percent of the cases a man is the victim.⁴ The reality is not what the men would claim, nor what media reporting would have us believe.

We now have a national debate about multiculturalism which claims that people of color and women have so much power that American society itself is threatened. We are told that Native Americans and other people of color are a danger and a threat to our national unity and to our “American” way of life. White people are filing a competing claim of victimization, claiming to be the victims of multiculturalism.

We need to ask ourselves: Who was killed and who ended up with the land base of this country? Today, who has the jobs, who gets into the universities, who earns more pay, and who gets more media attention for their concerns, white people or people of color?

Some white people are counterattacking today by saying, “Political correctness rules the universities.” “We just want our rights too.” “They want special status.” “They’re taking away our jobs.” Some of the things we say when we claim to be victims include: “White

⁴ Women's Action Coalition. *Stats: The Facts About Women* (New York: New Press, 1993), pp. 55-57.. This includes women and men who are battered by same-sex partners.



males have rights too.” “I have it just as bad as anybody.” “White people are under attack.”

Those with power have many resources for ensuring their view of reality prevails, and they have a lot at stake in maintaining the status quo. They will employ the tactics described above to defend their interests. We must be aware of these tactics and able to counter them. When unchallenged, they can be used to justify further inequality and violence. If we keep our eyes clearly on the power and the violence, we can see that these tactics are transparent attempts to prevent placing responsibility on those who commit and benefit from acts of injustice. Our strongest tools are a critical analysis of who has power and an understanding of the patterns and consequences of present actions and policies.

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