

SYSTEMIC RACISM, ECONOMIC CAPITAL AND THE CITY OF MYRTLE BEACH

In this article the key concepts for understanding and defining inequalities are the theory of systemic racism, and the spatial capital based on Bourdieu's theory. I focus on economic capital and the experiences of discrimination in the workplace and how African Americans explain inequalities in the city on the basis of money.

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This article is based on research for my bachelor thesis *Spatial dimension of systematic racism in Myrtle Beach*. The city Myrtle Beach is located in the state South Carolina in USA by the sea and it is a popular travel destination. The African American minority counts 16 percent of the city population (data.census, 2019), in some neighborhood the minority counts to 70% (viz. neighborhood N Ocean BLVD/21ST Ave M). (Neighborhoodscout, 2020.)

I was inspired to do this research because of my work experience in the Landshark restaurant in Myrtle Beach. The city seemed divided and inequalities in the city appeared visible to me. For example, I noticed that the public transport in the city was almost solely used by black Americans, in hotels there were working only black Americans as housekeepers, some restaurants were used mainly by black Americans.

The research was conducted in the beginning of the year 2021. The research methods included five interviews with African Americans with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Besides, I analyzed city maps from the US census (2020). The key concept for understanding and defining inequalities in Myrtle Beach is the theory of systemic racism (Feagin, 2006)

and the spatial capital based on Bourdieu's theory (1998) of capitals: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. In this article, I focus on economic capital and the experiences of discrimination in the workplace and how African Americans explain inequalities in the city on the basis of money.

Economic capital

In the collected data, the inequalities in the city were often explained on the basis of economic capital, such as economic inequality, historically inherited economic capital, the pay gap between African Americans and white Americans, or the underrepresentation of African Americans in senior positions or in politics.

One of the respondents, Carter, describes the historically inherited economic capital of the African American minority on the example of the "Black Wall Street". Black Wall Street was a city district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was considered one of the richest African American communities in the United States with a wealth of oil sales. In 1921 the district was burned by white Americans on the pretext that an African American had tried to rape a white woman (Vox, 2019).

Carter (24) explains that on "Black Wall Street" African Americans had higher income than white Americans, so white Americans burned down the neighborhood. This event seems to be in his eyes an allegory for not being able to inherit economic capital among African Americans.

Because as soon as we do (have money), you destroy it, like literally, so of course we don't have anything. Because if my mama dies, my mama can't leave me nothing at all. So that's why I have to make it the best for me because I can't die poor, man.
– Carter, 24

Passing on economic capital to future generations proved to be important for all respondents. They described that they do not want their descendants to have to work as hard as they did, they want them to have more options, to be educated or to have a valuable skillset.

I want to leave my kids and their kids something, like they have an inheritance. Something like Rockefeller. My last name is Coleman so I want it to be like if I pass away, my kids and grandkids They'll be like ooh yeah, what's your name? Coleman, Oh my god, you are part of the Coleman's family. Like that's how I want it, like they know who they are. You are part of the Coleman's family, you are part of a legacy. That's how I want it to be.
– Carter, 24

The result of the historically disadvantaged economic capital of African Americans is, for example, the unequal distribution of land or companies (Feagin, 2006). John says that landowners and business owners are primarily white. According to him, there is a group of people who owns the "money units" vs the others who do not.

Division of the city

The interviewees described the neighborhoods in Myrtle Beach as either "poor" and "rich" or "bad" and "good" neighborhoods. These categories were mainly associated with the socioeconomic status of the inhabitants as well as the crime rates within a certain district. The respondents also described that there are more African Americans in "poorer" neighborhoods and more white Americans in "rich" neighborhoods. This is also reflected in the maps from the US census (2020), where a higher percentage of black Americans is associated with lower property value, lower income and higher percent of unemployment. (<https://bestneighborhood.org>, 2020)

Yes, I definitely think that the city is split up in a way where you see the majority of white people in one part of the city and you see like the majority of black people in another part of the city. And typically, the city that doesn't have as much income or is very poor you'll see more of the Black people or Hispanic living there vs a very like fancy rich neighborhood you see like primarily white people in those neighborhoods.
– Daniel, 28

FUTURE PROFESSIONAL: MAGDALENA TRHLÍKOVÁ



Where do you study?

I finished my bachelor's degree in Sociology and Social anthropology at Charles University, Prague in 2021. I also spend one exchange semester within Erasmus+ program in Tampere University.

What are the areas of your interest?

I am interested in migrations studies, urban anthropology and minority research. In future, I would like to learn more about these topics and about usability of anthropology approach in other fields.

What are your plans for the future?

Next academic year I am planning to start master's degree in Sociology with specialization in Social anthropology at the Charles University. I would like to deepen and broaden my knowledge, engage in research projects, and do some other internships.

According to interviewees neighborhoods which are described as "rich" and "good" are connected to higher "unwelcomeness" for black Americans. The minority in these parts of the city experience bad reactions from neighbors or police. This also contributes to worse conditions and fewer opportunities at work. Such a problem is described by John, who owns a construction company and travels to "rich" ("good") neighborhoods for work.

I mean if you are not white and this is a predominantly white area, they look at you as if you shouldn't be here, or they look at you like why are you here. So, I get asked a lot of questions like where I am going or what I am doing here when I am asked to be in certain places. So, like if I have a job in a nice neighborhood I get out of my vehicle and I am looking for the customer's house, then a neighbor can come outside and ask me what am I doing.
– John, 43

Discrimination at Work

Discrimination at work is viewed by the respondents as one of the biggest problems. Respondents also stated that the first time they experienced racism was either at work or dealing with police. Aaliyah describes her first experience with racism when she was not appreciated at work and how she realized that. She had a first-hand experience with unequal evaluation in Myrtle Beach. She describes how she was the only one who did not get a pay raise while the other managers, who all had white skin, did. Because of this experience, she felt underappreciated at work she later left.

Because all of the managers around me other than the kitchen manager were you know white, I mean. And even when they weren't doing their job they still got more than I did and he still got sure that they got raises. Before I actually left all of the supervisors got raises except for me even though I was one of the hardest working supervisors there.
– Aaliyah, 34

Daniel (28) also recounts experiencing unequal evaluation as an African American. He describes that typically, if a black and white person does the same

job, the black employee is paid much less than the white employee.

According to John, employment discrimination depends on who owns and controls economic resources. People who have economic capital also have the power to control and take advantage of individuals with lower economic status. On the contrary, the ones who do not have economical capital can be abused by the system and, due to their lack of adequate social or cultural capital, are also easily replaceable and therefore at a disadvantage.

Mostly the people who run the job sites are the people with more money and money controls what most people do and don't do. – John, 43

According to John, racism at work is mainly a consequence of the unequal distribution of economic capital which is based on systemic racism. He claims that racism at work is experienced when a person has lack of capitals (economic, social, culture). John describes the process of looping loans and debts, which he connects to the disadvantaged position of the African American population. According to him, racism is present when a person is in a bad financial situation and when he or she is substitutable.

Because that man has disrespect for you or he figures out hey he is gonna always need money, so I can treat him as dirt and I can make him do this I can make him do that. So it is more of a control thing, because you have to work to pay your debt. So those are the things that could be seen as racism, because they only do that to certain people.
– John, 43

Aaliyah, however, does not view racism as connected to the lack of economic capital and substitutability. She sees racism as a personal issue. She mentions that she was all the more sorry that her employer did not raise her salary when he knew that she was in a bad financial situation.

So it really bothered me that somebody you know tried so hard to, you know, keep me from what they knew I needed because of the situation I was in. What I was trying to do with my family, taking care of my mom and everything.
– Aaliyah, 34

Overcoming racism

Respondents further described certain ways to break away from systemic racism. According to the respondents, the way a black American can manage to break out of social structures of discrimination is to obtain cultural capital. One of the biggest problems is that the chances of getting cultural capital through education in the US is reliant on having access to economic capital.

Daniel has a higher education than other respondents. He also does not feel directly like a member of the African American community, his father is from Nigeria and his mother is from California and she has white skin. However, he still encounters discrimination on the basis of the color of his skin. Thanks to his cultural capital, he manages to overcome this discrimination. In addition, when he starts to speak he can avoid discrimination because he does not have African-American accent.

So I would say maybe I was thought up differently or I was maybe thought up as not as knowledgeable or they weren't sure what to expect. Until they actually took the time to talk to me and get to know me and then they realized that.
– Daniel, 28

John describes overcoming discrimination in employment with the help of his skillset. He describes how he is not part of the system of discrimination at work, because he has a certain "skillset" that entitles him to choose from job offers and to not be as easily substitutable. He has the option to leave if he feels disrespected.

Another way to avoid discrimination in employment is through African American community networks. It is therefore possible to evade the discriminating structures of the majority society by holding certain social capital. This is described by Aaliyah, who admits that important work has always been obtained through an acquaintance with a person of the same skin color.

I guess you can say that I feel like the jobs and opportunities I did have come from other Black people who have seen something in me and wanted to give me a try. It was rare that you know someone that was white or a different race gave me a chance and genuinely wants to see me grow.
– Aaliyah, 34

Conclusion

One of the important questions in my research was how do African Americans explain racism and inequalities in the city Myrtle Beach? The interviews showed that African Americans explain racism, inequalities and segregation in the city mainly on the basis of economic capital inherited from systemic racism, unequal distribution of land and property today, but also unequal pay or the impossibility of promotion, which is reflected in a lower percentage of African Americans in higher positions. Respondents divide neighborhoods into "good", "rich" and "bad" and "poor". They also describe a higher percentage of white Americans in "good" neighborhoods and a higher percentage of African Americans in "bad" neighborhoods. According to the respondents, segregation in the city is based on economic inequalities. Economic capital is inherited (or not inherited) within the framework of systemic racism and so is cultural and social capital. In practice this manifests especially in discrimination in employment, but may also offer means to overcome discrimination for some, for example via education. The discrimination in employment was also often the first time for respondents to experience the systemic racism. ■

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