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Critically reflect upon what constitutes inequality; consider examples to underpin your response.

The Atlanta Child Murders case which occurred in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1979 to 1981 (Lloyd, 2019), provides a critical example of how inequality operates in practise, providing evidence of how structural constraints, institutional bias, and societal norms of the time, of race, class, culture, and gender, intersected to affect how victims and victims' families were treated by the public, media, law enforcement, judicial system, and government (Baldwin, 1985). Twenty-nine Black individuals, mostly young males, were abducted and murdered from poor communities with limited social and economic capital. The responses of police, media, the public, and politicians reflected deeply entrenched biases, as the missing were presumed to be runaways, and blame was placed on victims' families. This case highlights how structuralism, institutionalised power, and societal norms, created systemic constraints for victims and families (Baldwin, 1985). Critically analysing this reproduction of inequality, through a sociological lens, highlights the marginalisation of Black communities during this period.

The case began on July 21, 1979, when a 14-year-old Black male youth, Edward Smith, went missing (FBI, 2014). Smith is considered the first victim in the case (Renfro, 2015). Four days later, another Black male youth, Alfred Evans, 13, disappeared. The victims in the Atlanta Child Murders were predominantly Black male children, under the age of 18, from poor, impoverished areas of Atlanta; many from non-nuclear family units with single mothers as head of the family unit (Griffith, 2014). Outliers in the accepted victimology were two Black female children, under the age of 18, and six young adult Black males over the age of 18 (Renfro, 2015). However, all victims shared similar characteristics; Black individuals, from poor areas, often living in social housing (Harris, 1981a). In May 1981, the murders ended when 27 year-old Nathaniel Cater was discovered in the Chattahoochee River (Brown, 2022). In total, there were 29 victims in the case (Renfro, 2015).

The first response of the Atlanta Police Department was to assume that the initial missing Black male youths were runaways (Headley, 1998). This assumption reflected deeply ingrained, institutional bias, revealing the belief that certain communities were deserving of less protection and support (Bourdieu, 1991). Eventually, police began investigating the cases but treated the missing cases individually. As the disappearances continued, Atlanta police assigned an investigative task force, on July

17, 1980 (Renfro, 2019), and a month later officially created The Missing and Murdered Task Force on August 14, 1980 (Brown, 2022). When this task force was created, there had already been multiple victims (Renfro, 2019). Due to hesitation by police to investigate the growing numbers of missing youths, the parents of the missing formed the Committee to Stop Children's Murders or STOP, on April 15, 1980; four months before the police formed their task force (Brown, 2022). This grassroots activism exposed the unequal distribution of attention and resources given by institutions, such as the police, to communities seen as less worthy and reproducing the patterns of exclusion and neglect already felt by the community (Tilly, 1998). The initial Atlanta police task force in July 1980, had been formed due to lobbying by STOP, after months of petitioning by the organisation requesting serious police intervention (Renfro, 2020). In September 1980, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) began investigating and created a task force called ATKID (FBI, n.d.).

During this time, Atlanta's first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, was criticised by impoverished and working-class Black communities for prioritising the image of Atlanta as a prime location for businesses and industry and choosing to protect the image of Atlanta and avoid civil discord (Renfro, 2019). Lee P. Brown, the public safety commissioner, and Jackson stated that the case transcended race (Renfro, 2019), representing institutional authority as neutral and fair, while minimising the structural disadvantage experienced by the victims and families (Weber, 1947). Jackson stated to victims' parents that they should re-examine their responsibilities to their children to create a generation of citizens who abide by the law, shifting the blame from perpetrator to parent (Renfro, 2020), reflecting debates of whether social outcomes are manifested by personal agency or broader social circumstances (Murray, 2015). When concerns that the missing children had been victims of the racist group, the Ku Klux Klan, Jackson dismissed the concerns by assigning blame on the frustrations of a Black community which he described as racially and economically oppressed (Renfro, 2020); delegitimising the lived experiences of a marginalised community, through institutional authority (Bourdieu, 1991). After an October 1980 explosion in a local daycare, which killed four black children, Jackson again dismissed concerns that the Ku Klux Klan was involved, exclaiming that Black people were unable to accept that a Black person could have been involved (Renfro, 2015). Jackson framed the

Black community's concerns as deviant, displaying structural racism from his position of authority (Bourdieu, 1991).

For this group, having minimal access to financial resources, facing institutionalised racism, scarce opportunities for socio-economic progression, marginalisation, lack of capital, and media bias, demonstrated the intersectional challenges in seeking justice (Crenshaw *et al*, 2015). Symbolic violence impacted victims and families, who were viewed as less important than White victims, and created a situation of immense difficulty when seeking assistance in finding their missing or murdered loved ones. (Bourdieu, 1991). In the case of one of the missing boys, 11 year-old Edward Hope, Hope's family repeatedly contacted police, but because of their low-income status, lack of social connections, and having no social influence, the family was consistently ignored, with a slow response, little media and public attention (Renfro, 2020).

The victims and families had to contend with the social stratification of being considered lower class, living in social housing, and receiving welfare benefits; having low status, less education and social networking; and, initially, having no party, with no access to political power (Weber, 2019). This is evident in the case of 9 year-old victim, Yusuf Bell, who went missing in October 1979 (Renfro, 2020). Bell's mother, Camille, stated that it required more effort to get the public to care about an underprivileged child, from a poor community (Renfro, 2020). Bell criticised the media's "active effort" (Renfro, 2020, p. 72) to portray the victims as criminals or neglected and unsupervised. National media did not begin to cover the case until Autumn 1980 (Renfro, 2019). When the media began to more fully cover the case, articles were often sensationalised, and victims portrayed negatively (Harris, 1981a). Bell, along with Venus Taylor, and Willie May Mathis, two other mothers of victims who had formed STOP, the grassroots organisation in April 1980, worked to organise a rally in Washington, DC on May 25, 1981, to protest the Atlanta child murders (Renfro, 2015). Contending with institutional complacency and reductive policing, these mothers used collective action to confront the marginalisation of their community that delegitimised their concerns, particularly as Black women (Crenshaw *et al*, 2015).

In May 1981, the same month that the last victim of the Atlanta Child Murder case was discovered, Charles King, the director of Atlanta's Urban Crisis Center, stated that

“ghetto children” (Harris, 1981a) were usually left on their own by overwhelmed or absent mothers, leading to these children trying to create a family of their own on the streets. King’s statement, as a Black man, implying that the victims’ mothers were at fault, while not addressing the responsibility of fathers, is an example of the intersectional inequality of race, gender, and class, faced by Black women during this tragedy (Crenshaw *et al*, 2015). At the end of May 1981, after victims had been found in rivers, Atlanta police, under FBI advice, began staking out rivers. On May 22, 1981, officers staking out the Chattahoochee River heard a splash and saw a white Chevrolet station wagon vehicle turn around on the bridge and drive away (Rawls Jr., 1982). The police apprehended a 23-year-old Black male, Wayne Williams, a self-proclaimed music promoter, who claimed he had been enroute to meet with a potential singer for his company; however, no evidence of the woman or the appointment was ever found (Baldwin, 1985). Victim Nathaniel Cater, was found two days later, downriver from where officers had heard the splash (Rawls Jr., 1982).

Williams was arrested on June 21, 1981 (Lloyd, 2019). Some of the evidence used to implicate Williams included carpet fibres found on victims, that matched a carpet from Williams’ home, hairs that matched Williams’ pet dog, and a nylon cord in his car that seemed to match ligature marks on Cater and other victims (Lloyd, 2019). However, while most of the community felt relief at the apprehension of Williams, some were unsure (Renfro, 2015). Some felt that the arrest of Williams, a Black man, was racially motivated, and because police felt under pressure to solve the crimes (Renfro, 2015). Although there were accounts of Williams being seen with some victims, the presumption of guilt was already applied, with Black people always being surveilled by society (Baldwin, 1985). However, Williams was convicted, but not of all or most of the murders or abductions; instead, Williams was found guilty on two counts of murder for the last two adult male victims, Nathaniel Cater, and Jimmy Ray Payne (Rawls Jr., 1982).

The decision to try Williams on only the last two victims, was based on multiple legal strategic reasons; however, the main reasons were that the trial of Williams had the highest chance of conviction based on the forensic evidence and being placed at the scene of the crime on the bridge (Rawls Jr., 1982). The optics were that while Williams was on trial for the last two victims, he was viewed as being on trial for all the victims

(Baldwin, 1985). Selective application of forensic evidence for two victims to ostensibly save judicial money or time, when lab results had potentially implicated Williams in other murders, highlights the unequal approach to finding justice for murdered or missing poor, Black children, who lacked the social, economic, and cultural capital enjoyed by privileged groups (Marx and Engels, 2010). This effectively ended any further investigation into the multiple other victims remaining on the list.

Examining theories of what constitutes inequality and equality is mandatory, to fully comprehend the disparities in the case, with definitions of inequality and equality being highly contested and debated (Bottero, 2005). Sociological theories often differ from other key metrics such as income and occupation, instead focusing on repeating inequality structures reproducing over time (Bottero, 2005). Karl Marx (Marx and Engels, 2010) described inequality as originating from the capitalist system's mode of production, in which the wealthy class bourgeoisie exploits the working-class proletariat. The bourgeoisie own and control the means of production, such as factories, land, and businesses, which the proletariat must then rely on for survival by selling their labour and services (Marx and Engels, 2010). This creates a means of control of the wealthy over the poor. From this perspective, Black communities in impoverished areas of Atlanta, in low-income employment, subsidised by welfare, created a vulnerability to exploitation and deemed as disposable (Marx and Engels, 2010). Atlanta in the southern state of Georgia, was still facing racial economic inequality from its history of segregation (O'Connell *et al*, 2016). Atlanta's racially segregated labour opportunities benefitted Atlanta's economy at a cost to the victims (O'Connell *et al*, 2016).

Pierre Bourdieu expanded on this idea and viewed inequality as a result of four forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Economic capital is the financial resources, and property one owns. Cultural capital involves access to respected educational institutions, language skills, cultural knowledge, and socially acceptable mannerisms (Bourdieu, 1991). Social capital is having connections to networks that can open possibilities and opportunities. Symbolic capital is a nuanced form of social power and exists when society recognizes and validates individuals due to a combination of economic, cultural, and social capital, and grants them respect and validation (Bourdieu, 1991). The Atlanta police's dismissive views of the victims as runaways, is an example of symbolic

violence. By labelling victims as runaways, the police transferred the onus of responsibility from an external perpetrator to the victims and families own deviance (Bourdieu, 2015). This portrayal of victims forced families to have to argue against this accepted norm of poor, young, Black youths, in order to demand law enforcement assistance. The habitus of the police in the perception and stereotyping of missing Black children, contributed to the non-urgent approach of their involvement (Bourdieu, 1977). Black mothers' appeals for help was deligitimised through a lens of racial, gender, cultural, class bias.

While Marx and Bourdieu viewed inequality as originating in the control and reproduction of capital, Max Weber's perspective on inequality was based on social stratification, via three main categories (Weber, 2019). These categories are orders of social hierarchy which consists of class, status, and party (Weber, 2019). Class is one's position in society based on wealth, income, property ownership, and earning opportunities. Within class, there is also the concept of stronger social position. Two equally wealthy individuals might still be considered unequal if one has better education or powerful social networks (Weber, 2019). The next category, status, is about reputation and social recognition; how people view and respect others in society (Weber, 2019). The last category is party, which encompasses political and governing entities that have direct control over policy making and legislation. Weber's tripartite model viewed holistically determines the levels of equality and inequality an individual or group may experience, when all three are applied to one's social circumstances (Weber, 2019). When police labelled victims as runaways, this resulted in the systematic denial of protection and support. Through this lens, victims and families were made socially invisible on each level, dictating whose suffering is given witness to (Weber, 2019).

Weber's theory shows how social aspects can combine to create inequality, while Charles Tilly examines the role of how organisations, also known as institutions, reproduce and embed these inequalities across consecutive generations (Tilly, 1998). Organisations, such as the education system, government, and businesses, systemically reproduce and reinforce social divisions between demographics, including race, class, and gender (Tilly, 1998). Within organisations, there are mechanisms; opportunity hoarding, exploitation, emulation, and adaptation.

Opportunity hoarding occurs when privileged groups restrict access to opportunities to mainly individuals from a similar background; this can be demonstrated by the concept of networking and standard hiring practices. This process can perpetuate a structural advantage as the same group of people retain control. Exploitation occurs through an unequal relationship between those in power who profit from the low-paid or compensated labour of another group, with this exploitation being validated through organisational norms (Tilly, 1998). Emulation as a mechanism happens through the copying of existing inequality models; a new company, school, or business mirrors existing structures' formats, reproducing non-inclusive rules (Tilly, 1998). Lastly, is the mechanism of adaptation, consisting of practices, routines, and beliefs that normalise inequalities and organisational biases. Adaptation creates a view that inequalities are just how things are, and people should accept that (Tilly, 1998). The opportunity hoarding of delayed police action; the exploitation of the suffering of Black families to allow the improving image of Atlanta to remain; the emulation of biased law enforcement practices; and the adaptation and normalisation of inequality, all combined to systematically disadvantage the community (Tilly, 1998).

Expanding on Tilly's concept of organisations, or institutions, Kimberle Crenshaw examines how these organisations interact and reflect intersectional inequality, combining race, gender, class, culture, and stereotyping; and, how understanding why those who are disadvantaged, requires more than assigning one causal factor (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw looked at how structural intersectionality, institutions such as the legal and welfare systems, and places of employment, can create additional obstacles to those who belong to more than one marginalised group (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw also looked at political intersectionality, how policies and regulations, and political decision-making often negates the needs of those same marginalised groups. Crenshaw views inequality as multi-dimensional, and for those with coinciding layers of disadvantage, a more difficult societal environment to navigate (Crenshaw, 1991). Single, economically deprived, Black mothers, were stereotyped and blamed as a cause for their children being missing or murdered; often with attention on mothers and not absent fathers (Harris, 1981a) and are often viewed as intentionally or unintentionally exposing themselves to danger, especially in media (Sommers, 2016). However, these women face intersectional prejudice that is greater

than sexism or racism alone; with each bias compounding the effect of the other (Sommers, 2016).

Taking a very different approach to what constitutes inequality and equality is Charles Murray. Murray views IQ as the strongest predictive factor of successful life outcomes, such as employment, education, financial stability (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Murray theorised that societies are becoming increasingly meritocratic, and that cognitive ability is rewarded over inherited privilege. Therefore, these “cognitive elite” (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, p. 513) create a natural cognitive stratification, separating lower intelligence individuals from the higher IQ group. Murray also viewed the poor as having moral failings, due to the incentivising of having children, particularly as single mothers, and being financially supported through government aid programs (Murray, 2015). Murray believed that eliminating government social assistance would correct this culture of poverty (Murray, 2015). The focus on single mothers as a causal factor for the abduction or murder of their children, was a repeating trope during the Atlanta Child Murders case (Harris, 1981a).

Murray’s view on inequality is in stark contrast to other theorists’ views. Murray’s views contrast with Crenshaw (1991) who believed that inequality originates from intersecting oppressive systems, race, class, and gender, while Murray rejects that idea and theorises that it is intelligence that is the defining factor in inequality, not discrimination (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Murray also differs with Tilly’s views; while Tilly explains inequality as the result of social systems that encourage hoarding of opportunities and exploitation of underprivileged groups, allowing dominant groups to retain control, Murray contends that it is intelligence that creates social stratification, not institutions or bias (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Murray’s theory also differs from Bourdieu’s (2010) concept of habitus and cultural capital, contending that even if social and cultural opportunities were equal, higher cognitive ability would still create inequality in society.

Freidrich Hayek views equality and inequality in a similar way to Murray, as Hayek also believes in a form of meritocratic society (Hayek, 2011). However, while Murray theorises inequality is caused by a natural intellectual ability (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), Hayek postulates inequality is caused by a freedom of opportunity, and that

inequalities are a natural result of individual choices (Hayek, 2011). Hayek states that in a truly free society, individual's will have specific abilities and talents and will decide how to use or not use them. These choices will create an organic disparity between people and groups, but that this is necessary to retain a society that allows personal liberties, as well as incentivising others to also endeavour to improve their personal situations (Hayek, 2011). Essentially, equalising outcomes will undermine freedom. From this perspective, the unequal treatment of victims and families was a natural outcome of different social circumstances and opportunities, that is inherent in a free society (Hayek, 2011).

Hayek's views are contrasted with Marx, who viewed inequality as a structural outcome of the exploitation of classes (Marx and Engels, 2010). Marx applied capitalism as structurally causing and benefitting from inequality, with the wealthy bourgeoisie dominating the poorer proletariat. Marx viewed this inequality as inevitable, within this capitalist construct (Marx and Engels, 2010). Hayek rejected the idea that structures are problematic, and that it is individuals creating their own inequality by using or not using their innate talents and abilities, being responsible for reaping rewards or suffering failures (Hayek, 2011). Hayek differed from Weber as well, with Weber's tripartite approach, reiterating that it is class, status, and party that shape and reproduce inequality (Weber, 2019). Weber, unlike Hayek, did not view society as truly free, explaining that bureaucratic institutions like governments, limit individual autonomy, restrained by rules and regulations, which constrains social mobility (Weber, 2019).

Bureaucracy and policies during the 1979 to 1981 period in which the Atlanta Child Murders case occurred, also contributed to the delays in investigating the missing children and adults. In 1974, A. Reginald Eaves was hired by Mayor Jackson, as the the Atlanta Public Safety Commissioner, which resulted in serious upheaval in the police force, due to racial tensions between White officers, and the plans Eaves had to create a more racially equal police force (Farber, 1981). This had the effect of a loss of approximately 600 police officers, as complaints from officers were litigated (Farber, 1981). The next Atlanta Public Safety Commissioner, Lee P. Brown, had tenure during the case, and defended Atlanta police, stating that the police require a 24 hour wait before designating someone as missing, assuming the missing individual is a runaway

until that time has elapsed (Harris, 1981b). The FBI only officially joined the investigation later, in 1980 (FBI, n.d.). There was no centralised state mandate on how to respond to missing person cases, with cases being handled at local level, dependent on that police force's policies (FBI, n.d.). It wasn't until 1982 when the Missing Children Act, which aimed to address the lack of a centralised database, and state and local officials' inability to coordinate case information with each other, was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Reagan (Reagan Library, 1982). This allowed for details of missing children to be the FBI's National Crime Information Center, the NCIC (NVCRW Resource Guide, 2005). The Missing Children Act was created in response to the abduction and murder of a White 6 year-old child, Adam Walsh. Walsh's parents advocated for their son and received considerable and immediate public attention (Fritz and Altheide, 1987). This case directly paved the way for the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the NCMEC, a Congressionally funded non-profit organisation, coordinating missing children's case information with law enforcement, media, and public efforts (Fritz and Altheide, 1987). This response to one missing White child is in stark contrast to the response given to the multiple Black victims of the Atlanta Child Murders (Fritz and Altheide, 1987).

As of 2025, the policies involving missing children in the state of Georgia, GA Code § 35-3-83 2021, requires an immediate response by local law enforcement, and immediate dissemination of the details of the case to other local agencies in the jurisdiction (Justia, 2021). The Georgia Missing Children Center was created through state legislature in 1987 to assist police and communities locate missing children and is still in operation (Georgia GOV, n.d.). The NCIC and NCMEC are still in effect and used to coordinate cases (OJJDP, 2024). The 42 U.S. Code § 1981 Equal rights under the law act, was in effect in the time period of the Atlanta Child Murders and should have been a protection affording all citizens of the United States equal security under the law (Cornell Law School, n.d.). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination because of race or colour (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). In the treatment of victims and families, these laws did not act as safeguards. Black and minority children continue to receive markedly less media attention, and slower institutional responses than White victims (Sommers, 2016). The concept of "missing White woman syndrome" (Sommers, 2016, p. 278), which theorises that White females receive law enforcement help and media attentions more readily than Black

and minority females; and that the intersection of White race and female gender is the explanation for this dichotomy (Sommers, 2016). Minorities are more likely to be represented as perpetrators than victims.

The Atlanta Child Murder case draws attention to the enduring impact of intersectional and structural inequalities experienced by marginalised and minority communities. Victims' families contended with institutionalised racism, police indifference, media bias, and class stereotyping. Sociological analysis demonstrates that the situation experienced by the Black community was compounded by symbolic violence, opportunity hoarding, and social framing. Though policy reforms, such as the Missing Children Act, the NCIC, and the NCMEC, have since ameliorated some unsatisfactory aspects, and improved cooperation between agencies, this case details how inequalities influenced perceptions of the worth of missing Black children. Understanding the systemic inequalities that affected the victims and families is necessary for ensuring that there is equitable protection and justice for all, especially for historically marginalised groups.

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