

Introduction

On March 9th, 2013, 16-year old Kimani Gray was shot and killed by two plainclothes officers of the New York Police Department. Their East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn responded with protests, vigils and public outrage. Since Gray's shooting death falls on the heels of a series of such acts nationally, we at DS4SI want to share how we are thinking about this problem, with the humble hope that it will be a useful tool for activists around the country.

Problem Setting

"To name is to know. To name is to intervene."

Problem setting is the art and approach of describing a context out of which certain problems emerge. It assumes that the thing we tend to see as the problem is simply evidence or symptoms of the actual problem, which is usually both larger and deeper. The following "Five S" methodology has been useful for us in both problem setting and problem solving.

Afrophobia

Definition: Afrophobia is a term brought to us by grassroots scholar and organizer Makani Themba, who participated in the development of the term and shared the following definition: "Afrophobia is a term used to refer to a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards black people or people of African descent around the world. Definitions refer to irrational fear, with the implication of antipathy, contempt and aversion. The term "afrophobia" is observable as discrimination and racist violence on the basis of a person's skin colour, ethnic origin, and nationality." from RED, Rights Equality and Diversity European Network

The "Five S's": Structure, System, Symbol, Scale & Sensation

We use our own method of design thinking to think broadly about a given phenomena and the terrain out of which it emerges. In this case, we'll walk through the Five S's to set the larger problem that resulted in the Kimani Gray shooting. We don't imagine that this is the only way to set a problem or that we've come up with the "correct" problem or solution. We look forward to thinking with others and hearing your approaches and solutions, as well as hearing if this tool is helpful for you.

Structure

Police departments and elected officials tend to describe moments like the Kimani Gray shooting ahistorically; they prefer to decouple the institutions from the acting cops or agents. They want to keep focus on the specific cop(s) and the specific victim(s).

For those of us trying to change this situation, we have to see and describe the problem in a different way. We have to see the real actors as the larger structures that these individuals are embedded in. What we have are a set of public institutions--police, schools, courts, elected officials, etc--whose culture and practices are Afrophobic. Institutions like the New York Police Department which, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union, has made over 4.4 million stops, with just over 86 percent of those stopped and frisked being black or Latino. (It is also important to note that 88 percent of these interactions did not lead to an arrest or citation requiring a court appearance.) So we aren't just trying to get justice along the lines of a specific situation. We are looking to change the institutions that make these actions possible, thinkable, and imaginable in the first place. Of course part of what makes a shooting both thinkable and possible is the interconnectedness of these institutions. When schools use metal detectors, when courts pass laws like Florida's Stand Your Ground law, when politicians use words like "superpredator," it all combines to create the Afrophobic conditions needed to shoot Kimani Gray and others.

System

If we are to work with the truncated description afforded us of specific cop(s) and specific victim(s), our causal loop and our win would be to get rid of the specific cop(s) and to change hiring practices in some way to get better cops. Conversely, a loss would be that the cop is kept on the force and gets off without any legal repercussions. Although justice at the specific level is important, we can't simply seek a piece of fairness within the scale of the episode. We also need justice at the scale of the systems out of which multiple practices of Afrophobic violence consistently emerge.

We need a systems loop that bumps up to all of the Afrophobic actions and beliefs embodied at the scale of government institutions. We need the public institutions that most intimately interact with black youth—the schools, police, courts, etc—to fundamentally change. To change the behavior of Stop and Frisk means to change the institutions' gaze upon the black body. This requires a change of institutional culture.

Symbol

Symbols are incredibly important in changing culture. If our aim is to change institutional culture, we must be able to think in the realm of the symbolic. At DS4SI, we say “culture is the policy of the irrational.” The number of young black men being shot by police and other adults is irrational. It is a problem that is embedded in a culture soaked with Afrophobia. So while many will focus on legal policies that can change particular things (Stop and Frisk, for example), we will focus on the symbolic. We will look for symbols that can shift the cultural beliefs that underline the problem.

In these kinds of situations, the specific victim tends to become the symbol. We make the body and name of the person the symbol of the unjust violence against him. It's sensible, but flawed. It keeps us too narrowly involved in the specific situation (even when it resonates around the world), and it too often makes the discussion about the moral character of the individual. We need to develop or find a symbol that puts the public institution at the center. The institution should be the one on trial, instead of the specific person that was attacked by it (or even the specific attacker.)

Scale

The people in charge of the institutions at hand would like news of each of these shootings—and the public outcry that follows them—to go away as quickly as possible. (Just like the protests against other acts of injustice towards young black men.) It behooves them and their institutions to frame each situation at as small and specific a scale as possible. So Brooklyn, or even more specifically East Flatbush, is expected to deal with this situation as if it's an East Flatbush problem. One example of this is the media black out we are experiencing. While Kimani Gray's name was trending on twitter, it was hard to find mention of him in any newspaper outside of New York City. This situation is meant to keep the problem at the scale of the local.

However, the scale of the problem is clearly national. The situation in Brooklyn is happening to young black men in cities across the country, from Oscar Grant in San Francisco to Victor Steen in Pensacola to Wendell Allen in New Orleans, and the list goes on. We need to view this at the scale of a national problem of institutional Afrophobia.

And to think of this as a black problem is also too narrow of a scale. Should the community most affected by this problem be in leadership? Absolutely. Should all people who care about justice be standing up in solidarity? Definitely. The systematic attack on any group of people by a variety of public institutions is a civil society problem. It's a problem for all people who claim to care about democratic practice, justice, and equity.

Sensation

Whenever a young person is the victim of police brutality, sensations of loss, rage, frustration and fear flood the community. Usually early protests and vigils respond to these emotions in ways that can be both healing and incendiary. The institutions-that-be then step in to control these sensations and limit their spread. The media blackout becomes implicated in policing the public sensation around this situation. It's meant to keep the larger public from developing any feelings about it.

Even when media outlets covered the Kimani Gray shooting, their coverage was very relevant to any conversation about sensation. For example, the New York Times chose to describe “vigils and protests [that] quickly became marred by gangs of unruly youths,” while describing the massive police presence at Gray’s funeral as “at a respectful distance, the police kept a vigil of their own.” (New York Times, 3/24/2013.) So despite the fact that the issue at hand is a young black man killed by police, we end up with the sensation that it is the young people who are dangerous.

Another way that paying attention to sensation is helpful is that it helps us acknowledge when our approaches to the problem lack sensation. So while a long-term policy fight may be critical, it is also important to think about how to address affect and sensation in the meantime. For example, since Kimani Gray’s shooting is yet another show of force by the police, we are dealing with a backdrop of fear. Fear of the kind of force that police are capable of in our communities. So we must figure out ways to reclaim sensational space.

Conclusion

There are many ways to use this “Five S” methodology to think about possible responses to the Kimani Gray shooting--responses that can connect it to the truly national scale of the problem, that can use sensations and symbols to shift institutional cultures, or that can empower a country to take on the many forms of Afrophobia that limit and endanger us.

As an invitation to think with us, here are just a couple very divergent examples of social interventions that come to mind, based on this kind of design read. These aren’t full-fledged design suggestions, but more like imagery to play with as we think of ways to creatively address this situation.

- **International Peacekeeping Watch** – We invite youth (and/or adults) from multiple countries to come and witness how the US handles this situation, similar to how US and world delegations watch democratic elections or ceasefires in other countries.
- **Harlem Shake Re-hack** – We get all of these white folks and college students who are now Harlem Shaking for fun to do them again in solidarity with institutional change for all police departments, starting with the NYPD.

As we said, these are just a couple ideas to be seen as a jumping off point. We are excited to work with and support folks who are taking on this episode of Afrophobic violence or other complex problems in your community. If the “Five S” methodology seems useful to your work, or you are interested in the work of designing social interventions, please be in touch. You can contact us at <http://ds4si.org/contact>. You can also [click here](#) to read our original paper on the Five S Methodology.

DS4SI is a creativity lab for the social justice sector. We are dedicated to changing how social justice is imagined, developed and deployed here in the United States.