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Sociological Analysis of Falcon and The Winter Soldier

Asia Y. Mackey

University of Washington, asiam3@uw.edu

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Abstract

The following analysis uses a sociological lens to look at how Marvel Studios portrays the treatment of African American men in heroic positions in one of their latest television series *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*, and how this connects and compares to the treatment of these men in the real world. To find the connection, I looked at how Marvel Studios positioned the key African American characters in deviant and alienated roles compared to the key white characters. To make real world connections, I looked at the treatment of African American men in the military during WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, plus the treatment of African American men when it comes to policing. As a result, Marvel brings awareness to how African American men are viewed as deviants and how the thought of them being in a heroic position is almost impossible to believe. This leads to a view of African American men being alienated or pushed to alienate themselves because of society, while white men can do what they want and still be considered honorable, which is comparable to the treatment of African American men in the real world. In conclusion, the portrayal of the treatment of African American men when it comes to heroic positions is different from the treatment of white men in the same positions.

Keywords: Marvel, Falcon, Winter Soldier, alienation, anomie, deviant, and sociology

Sociological Analysis of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*

“This duality of our nature has as its consequence in the practical order, the irreducibility of a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive, and in the order of thought, the irreducibility of reason to individual experience” (Durkheim, 1965, p. 29). When doing a sociological analysis, one must consider the relationship between oneself and society; in this instance, one must look at how the self is reflected in the media, whether it is how society and the media look at gender, sexuality, age, or in this case, race. It is important to recognize why these things matter and how they express the type of society one lives in. This analysis looks at the Marvel Studios television show *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and its representation of the treatment Black men faced in the military, before the Civil Rights Movement. On top of that, this analysis notes the valuation of the White man in society, as well as the devaluation of the Black man, showing that society labels Black men as deviant and alienating them for the same things White men do. First, there must be an understanding and relevance of a sociological lens, and how it plays a part in this analysis.

Sociology, Alienation, Anomie, and Deviance

According to Berger (2017), “[t]he basic concern in sociology is how groups and institutions function (institutions are generally understood to be ways of patterning and organizing social life)” (p.135). As such, sociology is the consideration of the relation of self and institutions (which in this instance is society). To look deeper, sociology helps understand the effects of society and why it matters, especially in this instance with media contribution. Echoing Durkheim’s discussion of duality, Berger (2017) claimed “each of us is ‘double.’ We are members of society and therefore ‘in’ society, but, on the

other hand, society is ‘in’ us. Each of us has our own physical body and personality—that is, we are individuals—but we are also social animals who are members of society” (p.136). Because of this, many believe that societal values and views have been embedded in each of us since the moment we were born. From watching the interactions between your family and others to the TV shows you grow up watching, these interactions have worked together to socialize you.

With sociology comes key terms that help develop a deeper understanding of society. Those terms are alienation, anomie, and deviance. Berger (2017) defined alienation as “literally, ‘no ties,’ and refers to a feeling of estrangement and separation from others” (p.138). When it comes to alienation, it means having no connection to society or any group in society. Whether it was the person’s choice to alienate themselves from society, or society did it to them because of their differences, they have no ties to anything or anyone in society at all. While alienation is about having no ties at all to society or to any group within society, anomie means that one does not follow or conform to societal norms, so the societal solution is to cast them out. Coser (1971) stated that

such a state of affairs Durkheim calls anomie, a term that refers to a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups.

Anomie does not relate to a state of mind, but a property of the social structure. It characterizes a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms, and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals (pp. 132-133).

In simple terms, anomie is the act of casting a person out due to the fact that they do not follow the norms of society. We see this with the TV character of Karli Morgenthau in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Karli was a young woman of color who became the leader of the Flag Smashers, an activist group in the TV series. The Flag Smashers wanted to keep the world as unified as it was during The Blip, as world leaders sought to ignore the struggles that the survivors had gone through during those five years. Due to her views, Karli was seen as anomie for standing against such powers as the Senates of the Global Reparations Council (GRC) and the U.S. government.,

In sociology, deviance refers “to behavioral patterns that are different from typical or conventional (some would say normal) ones” (Berger, 2017, p. 144). The character of Bucky Barnes offers an instance of deviance in the show. Though society did not cast him out—since the world did not know he was the Winter Soldier—he cast himself out. He recognized that his time with Hydra, though against his will, was against societal norms, leaving him in a state of isolation. To know who is being implied as alienated, anomie, or deviant while looking at media content such as movies and TV, one must observe who is being unpeopled. Who are they showing as less worthy or important, not in the aspect that their character has no importance to the storyline, but instead in how the society of the character(s) views them. From there look for aspects of their story that identify them as alienated, anomie, or deviant.

Synthesis of Literature

The treatment of Black men, as seen in heroic positions in shows and movies correlating with the treatment of Black men in society, lacks in research compared to other areas. However, there is research that outlines how representation of people of

color (POC) in TV and films can have an effect on how that group is viewed in society. For example, there has been research about media depicting people of color in ways that pushes stereotypes, or using people of color as a way of making the show seem progressive because there is diversity in it which is seen to make it authentic and real (Parikh, 2021). These depictions of people of color are still used in TV shows today, where a black woman is displayed as an angry black woman when she speaks her mind, or the violent and aggressive black man if their voice rises a little too high.

Avila-Saavedra (2010) outlined how, even in shows that are supposed to depict families of color, stereotypes are still strongly used, such as in the Mexican telenovela, *Yo soy Betty la Fea*, produced in the U.S. as *Ugly Betty*. Avila-Saavedra (2010) pointed out how the show relies on Latino stereotypes to make it seem more authentic. The false portrayal that comes from this misrepresentation pushes POC into otherness by reestablishing false ideas of minority groups, such as Latina women being a temptresses by dressing provocatively (Avila-Saavedra, 2010), Indian men and women being seen as unappealing compared to their white counterparts (McWan & Cramer, 2022), or Black people being seen as loud and aggressive. Although there is limited research on racial representation in heroes of TV shows and movies, they all come to a very similar conclusion even in shows that surround POC: Whiteness is still at the forefront, and racial representation of marginalization impacts POC beyond shows and films.

Manifest Function: *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*

The story of *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier* takes place six months after *Avengers: Endgame*. The world is trying to get back to normal five years after Thanos

snapped away half of the population. Iron Man is dead, and Captain America, a White hegemonic super soldier also known as Steve Rogers, became a national hero during World War II after fighting to save the world from Hydra's attempt for world domination. In the process, Rogers crashed a plane into the Arctic to stop Hydra from detonating bombs, and as a result, he was frozen for about 70 years. He was woken up in 2011, only to find out that the world has changed and he is now a household name. Now, after the events of *Endgame*, he has chosen to stop being Captain America to go back to the past to live the life he wanted with the woman he loved, and has left behind his childhood best friend James "Bucky" Barnes, who is also a White hegemonic super soldier. The difference between Bucky and Steve, however, is that Bucky isn't a national hero; he became one of Hydra's experiments after his presumed death in the 1940s. Hydra injected him with their version of the super soldier serum, removing his memory and making him a shell of himself. For 70 years, Hydra used him as a pawn to kill their enemies until he came across Steve during one of his assignments. Steve saved him and restored his memories. Later, Bucky was pardoned for his crimes after helping the Avengers defeat Thanos in *Endgame*. Steve Rogers also left behind his shield and status of Captain America to one of his best friends, Sam Wilson, who was the first person Steve connected with in the 21st century. Sam Wilson is a Black Air Force veteran turned hero known as the Falcon since his flight suit has the appearance of Falcon wings.

With the weight of the shield resting on Sam's shoulders, he decides to give it to the Smithsonian, thinking that Steve's legacy should be displayed there. But instead, the U.S. government gives the shield to a White veteran John Walker, naming him the

new Captain America. Along with the news of the new Captain America came a new group of people: The Flag Smashers. This group has somehow gotten hold of a version of the serum that made Steve Roger a super soldier. This is dangerous because if the wrong people get their hands on the serum, they can build an army of unstoppable soldiers. The Flag Smashers, Sam, and Bucky search for the person who is making the super soldier serum to stop them. After losing a fight to the Flag Smashers and thinking they have nothing left, Bucky introduced Sam to Isaiah Bradley, another Black super soldier who fought the Winter Soldier in the Korean War. Sam learned that Isaiah was a hero during the war, but instead of being recognized for his acts of bravery, Isaiah's existence was kept a secret as he was thrown in jail and experimented on for 30 years by both the U.S. government and infiltrating Hydra agents.

Sam and Bucky find out who is making the super soldier serum. But while confronting the scientist, they are attacked. John Walker is also looking for the Flag Smashers, with the help of his partner and best friend, Lemer Hoskins. In their search, they come into contact with super soldiers who are protecting the whereabouts of the Flag Smashers. With John Walker underestimating the super soldier's strength and overestimating his own it leads Walker, Hoskin and their team to be defeated every fight. It comes to the point that Walker is disheartened enough that he takes the super soldier serum himself. At this point, Walker and Hoskins were able to locate Karli Morgenthau, the leader of The Flag Smashers, at her adoptive mother's funeral. Walker comes in demanding that Karli come with him and pay for her crimes, which incites a fight ending in the accidental death of Hoskins. In a fit of anger and heightened emotions due to the serum, Walker brutally murders a Flag Smasher who wasn't

involved in the fight with the Captain America shield. Sam and Bucky arrive and, enraged at what Walker has done to their friend's legacy, fight him for the shield. They come out victorious, leaving Walker to be honorably discharged. Sam is once again left with both the shield and the dilemma of whether or not to pick up where Steve left off and become Captain America.

To help with his decision, Sam visits Isaiah again to understand why Steve got to become a household name while Isaiah got a jail sentence, touching on Sam's fear of never being seen for more than his skin tone if he chooses to become Captain America. Isaiah tells Sam that "you understands. Every black man does" (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 22:02). After he tells Sam his story and that the only reason he is out today is because a nurse took pity on him and helped fake his death, Sam wants to get Isaiah's name out there, saying times are different and he could help him. Isaiah then goes on to state, "You think things are different? You think times are different? You think I wouldn't be dead in a day if you brought me out?" (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 26:26). He continues, saying, "They will never let a black man be Captain America. And even if they did, no self-respecting black man would ever wanna be" (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 27:07).

After their discussion, Sam goes home to consider what to do. Unexpectedly while Sam is practicing with the shield, Bucky shows up. Telling Sam that Steve gave him the shield for a reason, they agree to leave the past behind them and work together. Later, they are notified that The Flag Smashers are planning to attack a Global Reparations Council (GRC) conference in New York. Choosing to become the world's first Black Captain America, Sam, working with Bucky, stops the Flag Smashers and

saves the officials at the conference. Speaking to the officials who were at the conference, Sam tells them they have to do better. stating, “You have as much power as an insane god or a misguided teenager. The question you have to ask yourself is, how are you going to use it?” (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 30:57).

At the end, Sam visits Isaiah again, telling him that “we built this country. Bled for it. I’m not going to let anyone tell me I can’t fight for it” (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 39:26). He shows Isaiah the memorial made for him next to Steve's, stating, “Now they’ll never forget what you did for this country” (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 41:12).

Sociological Analysis

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier highlights the treatment of Black men versus the treatment of White men, not just in the general way of life but also in the position of heroes. White heroes, such as Steve Rogers (his legacy in this instance), John Walker, and Bucky Barnes, are treated very differently than Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley. Steve Rogers became a national hero and household name for saving lives of soldiers during World War II, while Isaiah Bradley did the exact same thing during the Korean War only to come home to a jail cell, treated like ‘public enemy number one.’ The U.S. government put Isaiah in this horrid situation to the point of alienation, while at the same time lifting Steve’s legacy up. This directly correlates to how society has labeled Black men as deviant for so long that it leads to also being labeled as anomie because they’re not the norm until society wants something from them. This is especially true during war before the Civil Rights Movement. Once society gets what they need, black soldiers are thrown back into those positions of deviance and anomie until it gets to the point that they are either alienated or alienate themselves, just like Isaiah did.

When Isaiah tells Sam that he understands why this happened to him, that every Black man does, it pays homage to the fact that Black men have for generations been a part of this community that understands the hardships being seen as deviant because they are Black. For Isaiah, it meant being used as a tool for the U.S government during the Korean War only to be thrown away upon going home, while Steve Rogers became a living legend. This is a direct parallel to Black soldiers before the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Helen K. Black (2016), of the University of Maryland, interviewed five Black men from three generations who served during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Each was given a pseudonym for the study. The first, Mr. Turner, was a part of the 92nd Infantry Division, the Buffalo Soldiers, which consisted entirely of Black men. While interviewing Mr. Turner, Dr. Black (2016) asked him about the suffering he experienced, and he responded, “What hurts me is they falsified information about us. There was no recognition of what we accomplished with what we had to work with” (p.38). Black and Thompson (2012) had also written about how, “[a]fter the war, African-American men heard others’ versions of the war, which negated, denied, or stigmatized African Americans’ character and roles (Galloway, 1999). Not one Black man received the nation’s highest military honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor” (p.34). This shows how the U.S. government alienated these soldiers by erasing their accomplishments, but never erased the accomplishments of the White soldiers that they fought alongside. In the same way, the U.S. government in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* erased Isaiah, alienating him and his accomplishments, but never Steve Rogers.

For Sam, the remark from Isaiah corresponds to the treatment he gets just for being a Black man in America. For example, when the police officers showed up while Sam and Bucky were having a disagreement, the police automatically assumed that Sam was the one causing trouble until Bucky pointed out who Sam was. Then they started to feel bad once they realized that Sam is a hero. But when they saw him as just a regular Black man at the beginning of the interaction, they felt justified in their behavior. They also never questioned Bucky because he was a White man; the only things they asked were if he was okay and if Sam was bothering him. This is a common occurrence especially in America because Black men are seen as deviant and are automatically put in the position of the wrongdoer. The only difference between Sam and most of the Black men in those situations is that they are not heroes; they are regular people who have to make sure they say the right things so they can go home again. Buehler (2017) looked at the racial and ethnic disparities in the use of lethal force by U.S. police between 2010-2014, finding that “the number of deaths per million population among non-Hispanic, Black and Hispanic males were 2.8 and 1.7 times higher, respectively, than among White males” (p. 296). He went on to state that,

As exemplified by studies of juvenile arrests, traffic stops, and stop-and-frisk procedures, substantial evidence indicates that Black individuals and, to a lesser extent, Hispanic individuals are more likely than White individuals to be stopped by police or arrested. Altogether, this larger combination of factors adds up in a way that results in higher rates of legal intervention homicides among Black and Hispanic individuals than among White individuals. (Buehler, 2017, p. 296)

This directly ties into how Black men are seen and treated as deviant versus White men who are not. Black men were being killed at a rate 2.8 times higher than White men and were more likely to be stopped or arrested by the police than White men. This is why Isaiah told Sam he understands why this happened, that all Black men understand, even when he wishes it wasn't true. Isaiah understands what comes with his skin tone. Sam cannot even get in a disagreement with someone without police officers assuming he is doing something wrong, while John Walker slaughters someone in broad daylight and gets an honorable discharge. This shows the double standard of society is present even in the Marvel Universe. By showing this, Marvel is touching on and critiquing how White people are able to get away with the harshest crimes while Black people can't even get in an argument without having to worry about the police showing up.

Another example is offered by Asante (2020), when he talks about violence toward Blacks in America, as he notes,

Black bodies are not inherently less than White bodies but the gaze of a racist, even without consciousness of racism, has been prepared by the history, tradition, and ritual in the American society to punish Blackness because of the assumption of its negativity (p.g. 4)

This also pays homage to when Sam told the officials he saved at the GRC conference that they "have as much power as an insane god or a misguided teenager. The question you have to ask yourself is, how are you going to use it?" (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 30:57). With these people in these high places, they have the chance to change history and do better than the last and it would be believed they would do more for the people they are supposed to be helping, but instead there are teenagers and regular people

fighting harder for change than they are. The Officials Sam saved were more than ready to label Karli and The Flag Smashers terrorists before they tried to take a second to understand why they were fighting. This is a common occurrence that happens to Black people every day in any situation due to societies constant punishment. We've seen it in Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. All were portrayed in a negative light until people found out the truth that they were just living while black.

A final point worth noting is when Sam shows Isaiah the memorial, he had built for him. Sam tells Isaiah, "Now they'll never forget what you did for this country" (Feige & Skogland, 2021, 41:12). Sam is finally giving Isaiah the recognition he deserves after the government erased the hardships he went through for the U.S. during the war. This was important to add because it parallels what's happening today when it comes to Black veterans. After decades of White veterans being remembered and rewarded for their service during WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, Black veterans are just now being recognized for their service. Black's (2016) article, featuring three generations of African American veterans who served during those wars, discussed Mr. Turner's experience and pointed out that

although some African American veterans had been honored, it was not until 1996—50 years after the end of World War II—that President Clinton awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to seven [Black] veterans. Unfortunately, by that time only one of them was alive. (p.38)

Mr. Turner added at the end,

I want my government to say I'm sorry. We said you were cowards. You persevered. I want them to realize what was done to us. It is not enough to say we honor you now. They must first say we treated you badly. They did not have to love us, but they didn't have to lie about us. (Black, 2016, p.38)

It took decades to give Black soldiers the same awards their White counterparts received within the years of those wars. This is another example of how U.S. society has alienated Black men and soldiers even while they do the same things White men and soldiers have been celebrated for.

Latent Function

The latent function, according to Berger (2017), is what is “not intended and not recognized by people” (p.147). It can be interpreted as the ideology from Mannheim’s (1936) work, *Ideology and Utopia*: “...the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it” (p.40). In other words, the latent function or ideology is what is unrecognized or without meaning, in this case by the media. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* invites viewers to see that Black men are othered when it comes to heroism. When a White hero does something amazing, such as saving people’s lives, or in John Walker’s case, does something horrible such as taking an innocent life, they are seen as nothing less than honorable. When a Black man does the same thing as a White hero, saving lives and not taking them, they are seen as suspicious, uncontrollable, or dangerous to the point that they need to be locked up. African American men cannot be viewed from the position of a hero no matter what good they have done for the country or the world. The hero role is only meant for a White man and

the only reason a Black man should be in that position is to serve the White man's purpose, like soldiers in a war where they are nothing more than a means to an end..

The original Marvel comic about Isaiah Bradley, *Truth: Red, White, and Black*, that inspired *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, describes Isaiah as a hero, but later a threat to the government the moment he wasn't needed anymore because they had their White Captain America. It reflects the same ideology our society still has toward Black men today: They are seen as below White men and the only way they have a fighting chance to be above them is if a White man gives them this chance. That's why Sam had such a challenging time deciding if he wanted to be Captain America; he knew although he put on the stars and stripes, people would still see nothing more than his skin. He would never be a hero to them, just another Black man. This same thing is still expressed with Black men who are in the military today or who fought back during WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. When they are laying their lives down for the U.S. overseas, they are seen as brave, but never heroes; when they come back home, they are not even seen as brave. John Walker got an honorable discharge despite a murder, while Isaiah Bradley got a lifetime of trauma and scars after the government used him to do what they could not. This shows how society cares more about the skin tone of a hero and not the hero's actions.

Conclusion

To sum up, Marvel Studios' representation of the treatment of Black men in heroic positions is accurate in how the real world treats Black men and heroes as a whole. Marvel Studios shows how, in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, African American heroes are seen as deviant despite the good they do. This automatically

makes it seem like they cannot be in heroic positions, pushing them to the point of alienation. Compare this to the White male heroes who are automatically put in the position of heroic and honorable in society's eyes, no matter what they do. This demonstrates the same values society showed during WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, when Black soldiers were not valued or considered honorable when they came back home. They were still viewed as deviant, and it took 50 years for them to even be honored like their White counterparts. This is also reflected in the policing and the death rates of Black men compared to White men. Needless to say, Marvel Studios' representation of Black men's treatment does a good job reflecting real world societal views of Black men and heroes compared to White men.

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