

The Grace Interaction: A Closer Look

By Lorrie C. Reed

August 21, 2026

Introduction

This chapter introduces the "Grace Interaction" as a critical analytical and theological framework for understanding how Black Americans have not only survived but also thrived amid systemic oppression. It bridges the gap between statistical analyses that often predict failure among marginalized populations and the lived reality of resilience, faith, and communal love. By framing grace as a tangible, buffering force, the text argues that much of the harm caused by structural inequality stems from the deliberate withholding of grace, and that acts of restorative justice and community support can disrupt these oppressive patterns.

A Framework for Probability and Statistics

As conceptualized above, the enduring effects of slavery and systemic racism intersect with statistical concepts to perpetuate disparities in the overall well-being among Black Americans. The following section provides examples of how probability and statistical principles might contribute to negative psychological effects of ongoing racial trauma. Through the use of scenarios, these examples illustrate how these probabilistic principles functioned within the system of chattel slavery, demonstrating how initial conditions systematically constrained the lives of enslaved people.

Baseline Inequality: Baseline inequality refers to the initial disparities in resources and opportunities that affect the probability of success for different groups. Historically, for example, Black families were systematically excluded from wealth-building opportunities, such as

homeownership, due to practices like redlining and discriminatory lending. This exclusion resulted in significantly lower average wealth compared to White families, creating a foundational inequality that persists today. The trauma of being denied these opportunities has been transmitted across generations, leading to a collective sense of deprivation and diminished self-worth among descendants of formerly enslaved people.

An enslaved person born on a plantation started with a baseline probability of zero for economic self-determination. While a free White settler might begin with access to land or tools, an enslaved person was classified as a capital asset rather than a property owner. This initial lack of legal standing and total erasure of personal equity meant they had no foundational resources from which to build wealth or mobility.

Conditional Probability. Conditional probability examines the likelihood of an event occurring given the presence of a specific condition or set of conditions. The chance of graduating from college or becoming a homeowner is significantly influenced by prior conditions such as family income, school quality, and neighborhood safety. For Black Americans, the legacy of slavery and ongoing discrimination have resulted in lower family incomes, underfunded schools, and unsafe neighborhoods. These conditions diminish the probability of achieving higher education and homeownership, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited opportunity.

In the context of the enslaved, the probability of survival for an infant was strictly conditioned by the plantation they were born on. Given the condition of being born into a labor-intensive cotton plantation with high-malnutrition diets and poor sanitation, the probability of reaching adulthood was drastically lower than on a smaller domestic estate. The environment dictated the likelihood of survival before the individual could ever make personal choices.

Cumulative Disadvantage. Cumulative disadvantage describes how small, initial disadvantages can compound over time, leading to significant disparities. Therefore, a slight early disadvantage in schooling or housing can multiply across decades and become a major gap in earnings or assets. For instance, Black children attending underfunded schools due to residential segregation may receive a lower quality education, limiting their future employment opportunities. This educational disadvantage accumulates over time, resulting in lower lifetime earnings and wealth accumulation compared to their White counterparts.

An enslaved person denied basic literacy, often enforced by law, faced a compounding lack of agency. Being illiterate meant they could not negotiate contracts, read manumission papers, or easily coordinate escape. Each year of withheld education compounded, making it exponentially harder to navigate the legal structures of the time, eventually resulting in a near-zero probability of legal emancipation compared to those who might have gained early, illicit access to information.

Path Dependence. Path dependence suggests that historical events and decisions set a trajectory that influences future outcomes, making certain paths more likely than others. Note that once segregation, redlining, or underfunded schooling shape a family's trajectory, those effects influence the next generation's options as well. These historical policies have created a path dependence where Black communities continue to face challenges in accessing quality education, employment, and housing, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited opportunity.

Once an enslaved person was assigned to the "field hand" trajectory rather than a "house servant" or "skilled artisan" role, their entire life path was set. The skills demanded of field labor rarely provided the trade experience necessary for survival as a free person after emancipation. This locked them into a specific socioeconomic caste, ensuring that even if freedom was eventually granted, their path was limited to low-wage manual labor.

Risk Ratios. Risk ratios compare the likelihood of an outcome between two groups, highlighting disparities in exposure to certain risks. As noted in previous examples, Black Americans are more likely to experience underfunded schools, housing instability, and poverty compared to White Americans. These increased exposures elevate the risk of negative outcomes such as lower educational attainment, higher unemployment rates, and poorer health. The cumulative effect of these risks contributes to the persistent wealth gap and social disparities observed between Black and White communities.

The risk ratio for physical violence or mortality was significantly higher for enslaved Black people compared to their enslavers. If one looked at death rates during the Middle Passage or due to corporal punishment, the likelihood of a fatal outcome for an enslaved person was statistically immense, whereas for the enslaver, those specific physical risks were nearly non-existent.

Expected Value. Expected value helps explain why repeated structural disadvantage matters. Even if some individuals succeed, the average long-run payoff is reduced when the environment consistently imposes higher risks and fewer resources. Therefore, even if some Black individuals overcome systemic barriers to achieve success, the overall expected value of success is lower due to the consistent structural disadvantages faced by the majority. This includes limited access to quality education, employment discrimination, and economic instability, which collectively diminish the average long-term outcomes for Black Americans.

Consider the "expected value" of an enslaved person's efforts. Even if an enslaved individual possessed high intelligence or industriousness, the payout for their labor (i.e., freedom or wealth) remained zero because the structure of slavery strictly prohibited ownership of the fruits of one's own labor. Therefore, the expected value of hard work for the enslaved was always

suppressed compared to a free laborer, whose work held the potential (even if small) for individual upward mobility.

Confounding. Confounding occurs when an observed association between two variables is influenced by a third variable, resulting in misleading conclusions. Race in the United States has historically been tied to geography, wealth, school funding, employment access, and exposure to discrimination. This interconnection makes it misleading to attribute outcome differences solely to factors like motivation or culture. The observed disparities are not random but reflect structured differences in the conditions that shape probability itself, influenced by historical and ongoing systemic racism.

One might wrongly observe that enslaved people who worked on smaller farms were "happier" or "fared better" than those on massive plantations, attributing this to the individual's personality or the kindness of the enslaver. In reality, this is confounded by external variables like the global market price of cotton, the quality of soil, and the age of the enslaved population. The outcome was not a function of the individual's effort or character, but rather the structural and economic conditions of the specific plantation.

Survivor Bias. Survivor bias occurs when focus is placed only on successful or surviving entities within a dataset, while completely overlooking the failures. Such bias skews data, leading to overly optimistic conclusions. Placing the focus only on the Black Americans who succeeded despite the barriers may underestimate how strong the barriers were. The existence of successful individuals does not mean the odds were fair; probability describes population-level risk, not isolated exceptions. A structurally blocked group can still produce many successes, but the distribution of outcomes will be skewed by the environment.

Historical accounts often focus on individuals who successfully escaped via the Underground Railroad or those who gained freedom through exceptional circumstances. By focusing only on these survivors, one might mistakenly conclude that the system of slavery was surmountable through hard work or wit. This hides the vast majority of people who, despite equal or greater effort, never achieved freedom, thereby ignoring the systemic, insurmountable nature of the institution for the population as a whole.

Progress Against the Odds

Statistically speaking, post-slavery Black Americans should not have thrived. Every statistical projection, every historical pattern, every sociological analysis built on the data of oppression should have told a story of erasure. The math of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, mass incarceration, and the theft of generational wealth does not add up to survival, let alone thriving. Yet, Black Americans are still here and still making progress against all odds.

Based on their constant need to make a way out of no way, Black Americans have cultivated a resilience rooted in faith. Despite continued adversity, most of them survived and even thrived, pushing back against the odds and nurturing the capacity to incorporate adverse evidence without losing the fundamental belief in life's worth. Despite encountering continued racism and economic challenges, evidence pointed to the fact that although they were hard-pressed, they were not destroyed. Their fundamental belief in the possibility of a better life provided new evidence that prompted them to adjust their expectations. Black Americans who endured unjust treatment exhibited faith and trust in a God who was capable of evening the odds on their behalf. And this faith was part of their way of viewing the world even before they had the full picture. Because of their faith, many cultivated a sense of hope, which fortified their drive for self-preservation and the betterment of humanity through acts of compassion, love, and change, despite overwhelming

challenges. In many cases, the probability of survival increased in proportion to their faith and the magnitude of their acts of love toward their neighbors.

This kind of perseverance does not erase the material conditions of poverty, violence, or systemic injustice. It does not pretend that the centuries of theft, family separation, and dehumanization didn't happen or still don't echo. Rather, this perseverance works within those conditions, not around them. It does not remove the weight; it gives the strength to carry it and still stand. And in standing, there is life.

Statistical Applications of Grace as Neighborly Love

On first glance, statistics and theology appear to occupy two incompatible worlds. On one side stands the statistical paradigm with its cold probabilities, bell curves, expected values, and regressions toward the mean. It describes what is likely, what the data predicts, what the system tends to produce. On the other side stands grace with its unmerited favor, hope that defies the odds, and love that does not calculate. Together, these ideas represent the Grace Interaction, an attenuating element that intervenes in the harmful effects of oppression precisely where the numbers would predict failure. The Grace Interaction operates through community, through mothers standing in solidarity, through the retrieval of survival knowledge from foremothers and forefathers, through the insistence that justice will prevail because a synergistic term reconciles all.

The Grace Interaction Defined

The Grace Interaction serves as a theological, psychological, and communal force that shields Black Americans from the mental and physical impacts of structural and other forms of oppression. By fostering dignity, radical resilience, and communal solidarity, it acts as a buffer

against systemic forces like historical trauma, residential segregation, and ongoing racial discrimination. The risk factors include incarceration, housing discrimination, employment discrimination, and others. Each risk factor adds a certain amount to the predicted difficulty a person faces. For example, a one-unit increase in the experience of structural oppression would, on average, decrease the “success outcome” predictor by the size of its coefficient (β_1), holding everything else constant. The Grace Interaction serves as a collective “buffering” set of variables that work in the opposite direction of hardship. If a person has a high level of resilience, for instance, that lowers the expected negative outcome. In real life, these buffering variables don’t just add or subtract; they often soften the impact of the risk factors. The net effect is that as the Grace Interaction increases, the impact of hardship decreases. This is so because part of the harm of oppression operates through the withholding of Grace Interaction indicators and the programs they engender.

An Equation for Consideration

Hypothetical Research Hypothesis Formulations

- H_1 : Grace x Faith moderates (buffers) the negative effect of structural oppression on adverse outcomes.
- H_2 : Hope mediates the impact of adverse outcomes, which in turn predicts improved overall attainment.
- H_3 : Greater community-level involvement (the factor of Neighborly Love) is associated with higher individual-level socioeconomic recovery among formerly incarcerated Black people, controlling for structural oppression.

Balancing Life's Equations

A hypothetical multiple regression equation for a successful outcome for a Black man or woman might be defined, say, as sustained well-being, economic security, or self-determined flourishing. That equation might look like this:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 E + \beta_2 I + \beta_3 S + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 D + \beta_6 R + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Y = chosen measure of success (e.g., stable employment, net worth, life satisfaction, or absence of chronic stress)

E = educational attainment and quality of schooling accessed

I = intergenerational wealth (or its absence) and inherited assets

S = social capital and network density (including mentors, community ties, professional connections)

C = cumulative exposure to systemic discrimination (redlining, policing bias, hiring discrimination, housing insecurity)

D = direct experiences of individual racism (microaggressions, overt hostility, institutional gatekeeping)

R = resilience factors (mental health support, cultural pride, spiritual practice, family stability, therapeutic resources)

ε = the error term (measurement error)

For Black Americans, the coefficients β_1 through β_6 would negatively impact the chosen measure of success. Specifically, for Black Americans, β_5 and β_6 (discrimination variables) likely

carry negative weight, while β_1 through β_4 weaken predictions for a successful outcome because systemic barriers reduce their return. Critically, the error term (ε) is expected to be large, because no set of measured variables fully explains how Black individuals and communities create meaning and stability under pressure. Thus, the equation reveals that success is never fully predictable and never fully earned or unearned; it is a mix of measured disadvantage and immeasurable gift. Therefore, I submit to you that the Grace Interaction is a force that can bring about balance regardless of the variables or the circumstances, thereby making the whole more than the sum of its parts.

Fred and Mass Incarceration: An Application

The analysis so far shows that oppression does most of its damage by blocking grace. If you eliminate that denial of grace by unblocking those doors, oppression will lose most of its power to do harm. Here is an example based on the oppression of mass incarceration to illustrate the interaction. Recidivism is the outcome you are trying to predict; for example, whether Fred returns to prison within two years. Oppression (racial profiling, poverty, biased sentencing) is expected to increase recidivism. The Grace Interaction (employers taking a chance, landlords offering flexibility, parole officers showing leniency) is expected to decrease recidivism. When the Grace Interaction is added to the model, the coefficient for oppression becomes smaller (less positive), and its direct contribution to recidivism shrinks. In other words, oppression increases recidivism, the Grace Interaction reduces recidivism, and including grace reveals that much of oppression's power comes from withholding grace.

How the Grace Interaction Functions

The Grace Interaction functions as the mechanism through which systemic oppression affects adverse outcomes. In the case of mass incarceration, the initial negative effects of racial

profiling, poverty, and sentencing bias on reentry success are largely explained by the fact that oppression reduces access to grace-producing behaviors, such as leniency, restorative practices, and second chances. When the Grace Interaction is included in the model, the direct effects of oppression diminish, indicating that the bulk of oppression's harm is mediated by the denial of acts of grace. This does not mean oppression causes harm only by reducing grace; a direct effect may remain. But the intervening variable model reveals a specific pathway, one that points to a policy lever: if grace can be increased (e.g., through restorative justice programs), it may buffer or counteract the effects of oppression, even without immediately dismantling the systemic predictors themselves.

The Interaction of the Grace Interaction

The interaction of grace x faith, hope, and love identifies the human capacity to unfold despite stacked odds, a capacity that statistics can document but not exhaust. Thus, this Grace Interaction is a call to action: accurate assessment of damage, reparative policies, and amplification of protective factors to shift the underlying probabilities. The equation remains open because the wound is never the whole truth about a person, and the potential that exceeds any calculation is precisely where transformation begins. Implementing these "acts of grace" can significantly attenuate the effects of oppression, fostering healing and empowerment within Black communities.

Therefore, structural and other forms of oppression are major negative predictors of hardship, but psychosocial resources, particularly when cultivated together, are associated with meaningful gains. Interventions that strengthen Grace x Faith, Hope, and Love, alongside structural reforms that reduce discriminatory practices, are likely to produce the largest benefits. One caveat: Results presented in this overview are illustrative and require replication with empirical data and longitudinal designs to support causal inference.

The Impact of Statistics and Theology

Much is revealed as we examine the Black experience through the lens of probability and statistics. Spanning more than four centuries, the Black American experience has been a living laboratory where the paradigms of statistics and theology intersect. Both disciplines are trying to make sense of what we cannot control. Statistics measure the patterns we can see. Theology names the power that breaks those patterns. Statistical observations reveal that, for Black Americans, too often, the charts and tables reveal how the innocent are condemned, and the guilty are set free. The data depict how progress in the Black community is pulled back toward a mean of hierarchy. The numbers expose a system calibrated against its own broken standards and calling itself fair. By every statistical prediction, the expected outcome is failure and despair. Failure and despair prevail until acts of grace intervene, shattering every human system of measurement and demanding a new way of seeing and being in the world.

Summary

The chapter frames the Black American experience as a triumph of survival that defies historical and sociological projections of erasure. This resilience is deeply rooted in faith, hope, and an unwavering belief in life's worth, which facilitates perseverance even when systemic material conditions remain harsh. The Grace Interaction is presented as a shielding mechanism, a blend of theological, psychological, and communal resources that acts against structural risks like mass incarceration and economic discrimination. It functions as a set of “buffering variables” that can soften the negative impacts of institutional oppression. A hypothetical regression model illustrates how various factors, such as intergenerational wealth and systemic discrimination, influence success. As an example of how the Grace Interaction works, an analysis of mass incarceration demonstrates that a significant portion of the damage wrought by systemic bias is

the systematic denial of "grace-producing behaviors" like second chances. By implementing restorative practices and policies, we can increase the Grace Interaction and mitigate the negative effects of structural oppression, creating pathways for genuine recovery and transformation.

