

SECTION 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Introduction

Maurianne Adams

Social diversity and *social justice* are often used interchangeably to refer to *social differences* as well as to *social inequality*. These two terms are closely related but not interchangeable. When we refer to *social diversity*, we have in mind differences between social identity groups based on social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. These differences are reflected in a group's traditions, language, style of dress, cultural practices, religious beliefs and rituals, and these are usually termed "differences" from some norm that is privileged. It is difficult to perceive oneself, one's family and group traditions, language, style of dress as part of *diversity*—rather, the norm shapes one's notion of the "differences" of *others*, who are marginalized precisely because they are different. In this sense, it is clear why *diversity* ("difference") profoundly shapes the advantages of some groups (those who are part of the norm) relative to the disadvantages of others (because they are "other") and maintains *social inequalities* that are rationalized on the basis of these differences. We also use terms such as *oppression* and *social justice* to emphasize our focus on inequality as something more than difference.

Thus, although these terms are not interchangeable, they are inextricably linked in everyday discourse in that *diversity* is too often used to provide an excuse or justification for *inequality*. It's much more comfortable to talk about diversity than inequality, although clearly we need to understand both. We need to appreciate and value social and cultural differences, if we are to envision a society that acknowledges and appreciates such differences, by de-centering the norm. At the same time, the appreciation of social diversity is a necessary but not sufficient step to understanding the inequalities experienced by peoples of marginalized social groups. It is necessary to understand injustice if we are ever to dismantle the institutions and policies that maintain injustice and to reconstruct institutions and policies based on fairness, equity, and justice. As Young suggests (in selection 5), our challenge is to appreciate social diversity while working to dismantle social inequality.

Several key assumptions inform our perspective throughout this volume, and we identify them in this section as a cluster of four interrelated conceptual frameworks. Our core assumptions are presented in the General Introduction, and include our awareness that social identity groups occupy unequal social locations or positions relative to each other (that is, one group's privileges are directly related to another group's disadvantages). This awareness leads us to the following four concepts: (1) social group identities (such as racial and gender identities) have been used historically to justify and perpetuate the advantages of privileged groups relative to the disadvantages of marginalized groups; (2) these social identities, together with their relative inequality, have been socially constructed within specific historical conditions, although these social constructions are often rationalized as being derived from the "facts of nature" or sustained

by unquestionable religious beliefs; (3) the pervasive historical legacies of inequality require a theory of oppression to account for the complex levels and types of privilege and disadvantage that play out at various levels of human society; and (4) a theory of oppression also calls for frameworks that envision opportunities for empowerment and explain the success of past and present social movements.

(1) SOCIAL IDENTITY IS BASED ON SOCIAL IDENTITY GROUPS IN ADVANTAGED OR DISADVANTAGED SOCIAL LOCATIONS OR POSITIONS

The first conceptual framework presented in this section examines social diversity based on differences in social identity and social location. Tatum (selection 1) defines social identity in a complex, multifaceted way that captures the tensions between dominant and subordinate identities (those privileged or disadvantaged on the basis of social group memberships) and gives examples of the tensions between them in everyday interactions. She explores the development of social identity in the context of identity development more generally and describes the ways in which one's identity comes about through the interaction between one's internal sense of who one is (based upon one's social groupings) and the views of oneself and one's group that are reflected back by others in the broader society.

Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (selection 2) note how social identity combines self-perception with personal reactions to attribution by others, so that different contexts may highlight different dimensions of identity (such as racial identity in one context, gender or sexual or class identity in another). They also consider social identity at different levels of social interaction—at the micro level (between individuals), at the meso level (within communities or social institutions), and at the macro level (the overarching society and culture). Similarly, but without using the same terminology, Harro's "The Cycle of Socialization" (selection 6) walks the reader through specific micro, meso, and macro contexts within which social identities and social roles are learned from early childhood and reinforced during adulthood within trusted and familiar contexts—in families, schools, playgrounds, neighborhoods, the workplace, the media.

Both Tatum, and Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, situate social identity within specific social contexts, in that "social" refers to this individual/societal interaction. Both offer numerous examples of how one's social identity builds upon one's social group expectations of privilege or disadvantage, based upon cumulative, historical legacies of group privilege or disadvantage. The connections between privilege/disadvantage and the experience of social identity are the focus for selection 3, in which Johnson explores a number of everyday examples of historically rooted socially constructed inequalities based on race, gender, sexuality, and disability. His approach, if not his specific examples, is applicable to other forms of oppression treated in this book (such as religious oppression, transgender oppression, or ageism and ableism).

(2) THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION WITHIN SPECIFIC HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

A second conceptual framework involves an explanation of how social group differences are socially constructed in specific historical situations in which their social meanings justify inequality and oppression. In this way, social identities are understood as social creations—and the assumptions of superiority or inferiority, related to privilege and disadvantage, are also understood as social creations. As Johnson explains (selection 3), most of what we experience in personal

and social life is itself a social creation—and the social differences we consider so significant, so “natural” or so theologically sanctioned, are in fact based on unexamined cultural constructions and not on essential qualities of groups or persons. The implication of this is momentous, for if we understand how specific historical and cultural conditions have given rise to privilege and to disadvantage, we can also understand that these inequities can be changed. Freire helps us grasp how important it is for people to locate conditions of oppression within history, rather than fatalistically as inevitable—that “humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods . . . but also social institutions, ideas, and concepts . . . create history and become historical-social beings” (1994, 82). He recommends a problem-posing approach to education that takes “the people’s historicity as their starting point” (1994, 65).

It can be challenging to discover that skin color, accented speech, perceived gender or sexual orientation, or the presence or absence of a physical or mental disability are useless as indicators of talent, character, intelligence, or morality. Many of the readings in the following sections locate the stereotypes we have been led to believe about “others” within their specific historical and cultural contexts, emphasizing the fact that our assumptions about what it means to be female or male or transgender, gay or straight or queer, white, Latino, or black, young or old, learning disabled or able-bodied, Christian or atheist or Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim have been constructed within historical conditions with cultural presuppositions. Harro points out (selection 6) how we unconsciously absorb stereotypes and prejudices as an unconscious part of our socialization from the people who surround us and whom we trust to know what is right and correct.

The following sections have reading selections that refer explicitly to the historical roots of specific patterns of advantage and disadvantage, and the stereotypes associated with them. Lipsitz (selection 11), and Oliver and Shapiro (selection 28) point to specific moments in history that account for the persistence of racism and classism in the present. Roppolo (selection 10), Hilberg (selection 49), Echo-Hawk (selection 52), Lorber (selection 61), and Cerney (selection 97) demonstrate the value of historical analyses of patriarchy, Christian hegemony in Europe and in the United States, or culturally sanctioned assumptions about age, gender, sexuality, and disability. Understanding that we have inherited these stereotypes as part of our intergenerational legacy helps to demystify them, makes them seem less inevitable and more susceptible to education and change. This historical understanding is important if we are also to learn about social resistance movements in the past that also are our legacy and that inspire us to continue working toward change.

(3) FRAMEWORKS FOR ANALYSIS OF OPPRESSION

Social justice needs a theory of *oppression* in order to make sense of the sources and persistence of social inequality in a pluralistic U.S. society that was founded on concepts of equality of opportunity and fairness in life’s rewards. Thus, the third conceptual framework presented in this section involves our moving beyond the individual (or “micro”) level of the socialization process, to analyze how oppression is enacted and reproduced at the institutional level (“meso”) and the societal/cultural (“macro”) level. Even though most of the examples in Tatum (selection 1), Johnson (selection 3), and Harro (selection 6) focus on the individual (“micro”) level of privilege and disadvantage, it is clear that our everyday personal experiences take place in larger institutional contexts such as extended families, neighborhoods, schools, places of worship, and that our experiences of privilege or disadvantage in these social institutions are reinforced by the societal and cultural messages we simultaneously pick up from the media and understand to be part of our normative culture.

In selection 4, Bell itemizes the defining features of oppression and presents an inclusive approach to the many different forms of oppression—such as racism, classism, sexism—that

also highlights their complex intersections in everyday life. This approach is reinforced and developed by Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin as the interplay of *levels* of oppression—the individual, the institutional, the societal levels—as well as *types* of oppression—the conscious and the unconscious. They define key terminology and analyze the complex and overlapping ways by which interpersonal, institutional, and societal/cultural dimensions of oppression reinforce each other. They are explicit about several underlying assumptions, namely that there is no hierarchy of oppression, that all forms of oppression are interconnected, and that confronting oppression benefits everyone.

There is more than one way to analyze such a complex societal phenomenon as oppression and this section presents at least three such approaches. The first can be called a *psychological approach* in that it locates the psychological processes of socialization within the institutions and broader culture of a society (for example, Tatum in selection 1, Kirk and Okazawa-Rey in selection 2, and Harro in selection 6). The second can be called a *sociological approach* in that it focuses on the structural and societal dimensions of oppression, and is presented here by Bell, Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (selection 4) (Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin 2007). The third, presented here by Young (selection 5), is located within a *philosophical and political discourse* about theories of social justice, and differentiates *social* justice from *distributive*, *punitive*, or *remedial* theories of justice (Young 1990, 2001). Young analyzes the dynamics of oppression—as do Bell, Griffin, Hardiman, and Jackson—but seen by her as five “faces” or facets that interchangeably describe how oppression is experienced by those who are disadvantaged on the basis of social identity groups—namely through their exploitation, powerlessness, and marginalization by those in dominant social positions, or their experience of cultural imperialism and violence.

These three approaches to the systemic dimension of oppression are compatible and mutually illuminating, while at the same time focusing on different dimensions of complex social phenomena. And they can be used as analytic frameworks for many readings throughout this volume. In selections 47 and 48, for example, Blumenfeld and Joshi explicitly take one or another of these conceptual frameworks to theorize historical and contemporary religious oppression and Christian privilege.

(4) FRAMEWORKS FOR ENVISIONING EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

All approaches to oppression have implications for a view of society that might conceivably be characterized instead by fairness and justice. In reading selections 3–5, one can instead imagine what a non-oppressive society might look like, in the absence of each and all five faces of oppression (selection 5), or the reversal of the examples and dynamics of oppression as described in selections 3 and 4. How one might actually describe actions or plan projects toward social change in order to achieve relationships, institutions, and an overarching social system and culture that do not enforce or reproduce oppression is a more challenging question and a challenge that this volume accepts. Each one of the topic sections ends with selections describing Next Steps that people have taken or can imagine taking to transform the specific forms of oppression into empowering relationships and just, equitable social institutions. The volume concludes with a full section describing such steps. So this section on conceptual frameworks, as a prelude to these discussions, presents Harro’s “Cycle of Liberation” (selection 7) as a companion piece to her “Cycle of Socialization” (selection 6) in which she describes personal behaviors that anyone can engage in, to challenge and to transform individual behavior at the personal level. Other selections throughout this volume and in the final section add collaborative institutional and societal/cultural change projects to the repertoire of possibilities available for concerted, effective social change.

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1

The Complexity of Identity

"Who Am I?"

Beverly Daniel Tatum

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether? . . . What has my social context been? Was I surrounded by people like myself, or was I part of a minority in my community? Did I grow up speaking standard English at home or another language or dialect? Did I live in a rural county, an urban neighborhood, a sprawling suburb, or on a reservation?

Who I am (or say I am) is a product of these and many other factors. Erik Erikson, the psychoanalytic theorist who coined the term *identity crisis*, introduced the notion that the social, cultural, and historical context is the ground in which individual identity is embedded. Acknowledging the complexity of identity as a concept, Erikson writes,

We deal with a process "located" *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*. . . . In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them.

...

WHO AM I? MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime. . . . The salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives. The process of integrating the component parts of our self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey.

Which parts of our identity capture our attention first? While there are surely idiosyncratic responses to this question, a classroom exercise I regularly use with my psychology students reveals a telling pattern. I ask my students to complete the sentence, "I am _____," using as many descriptors as they can think of in sixty seconds. All kinds of trait descriptions are used—friendly, shy, assertive, intelligent, honest, and so on—but over the years I have noticed something else. Students of color usually mention their racial or ethnic group: for instance, I am Black, Puerto Rican, Korean American. White students who have grown up in strong ethnic enclaves occasionally mention being Irish or Italian. But in general, White students rarely mention being White. When I use this exercise in coeducational settings, I notice a similar pattern in terms of gender, religion, and sexuality. Women usually mention being female, while men don't usually mention their maleness. Jewish students often say they are Jews, while mainline Protestants rarely mention their religious identification. A student who is comfortable revealing it publicly may mention being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Though I know most of my students are heterosexual, it is very unusual for anyone to include their heterosexuality on their list.

Common across these examples is that in the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture. In Eriksonian terms, their inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.

The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or "other" in their eyes. In my life I have been perceived as both. A precocious child who began to read at age three, I stood out among my peers because of my reading ability. This "gifted" dimension of my identity was regularly commented upon by teachers and classmates alike, and quickly became part of my self-definition. But I was also distinguished by being the only Black student in the class, an "other," a fact I grew increasingly aware of as I got older.

While there may be countless ways one might be defined as exceptional, there are at least seven categories of "otherness" commonly experienced in U.S. society. People are commonly defined as other on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability. Each of these categories has a form of oppression associated with it: racism, sexism, religious oppression/anti-Semitism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and ableism, respectively. In each case, there is a group considered dominant (systematically advantaged by the society because of group membership) and a group considered subordinate or targeted (systematically disadvantaged). When we think about our multiple identities, most of us will find that we are both dominant and targeted at the same time. But it is the targeted identities that hold our attention and the dominant identities that often go unexamined.

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DOMINATION AND SUBORDINATION

... Dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinates operate. The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used. Whether it is reflected in determining who gets the best jobs, whose history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society, the dominant group has the greatest influence in determining the structure of the society.

The relationship of the dominants to the subordinates is often one in which the targeted group is labeled as defective or substandard in significant ways. For example, Blacks have historically been characterized as less intelligent than Whites, and women have been viewed as less emotionally stable than men. The dominant group assigns roles to the subordinate that reflect the latter's devalued status, reserving the most highly valued roles in the society for themselves. Subordinates are usually said to be innately incapable of performing the preferred roles. To the extent that those in the target group internalize the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability.

... The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity. ... Consequently, it remains perfectly acceptable in many circles to tell jokes that denigrate a particular group, to exclude subordinates from one's neighborhood or work setting, or to oppose initiatives that might change the power balance.

... The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants. Even when firsthand experience is limited by social segregation, the number and variety of images of the dominant group available through television, magazines, books, and newspapers provide subordinates with plenty of information about the dominants. The dominant worldview has saturated the culture for all to learn. Even the Black or Latino child living in a segregated community can enter White homes of many kinds daily via the media. However, dominant access to information about the subordinates is often limited to stereotypical depictions of the "other." For example, there are many images of heterosexual relations on television, but very few images of gay or lesbian domestic partnerships beyond the caricatures of comedy shows. There are many images of White men and women in all forms of media, but relatively few portrayals of people of color.

... In a situation of unequal power, a subordinate group has to focus on survival. It becomes very important for subordinates to become highly attuned to the dominants as a way of protecting themselves. For example, women who have been battered by men often talk about the heightened sensitivity they develop to their partners' moods. Being able to anticipate and avoid the men's rage is important to survival.

Survival sometimes means not responding to oppressive behavior directly. To do so could result in physical harm to oneself, even death. ...

The use of either strategy, attending very closely to the dominants or not attending at all, is costly to members of the targeted group. "Not-learning" may mean there are needed skills that are not acquired. Attending closely to the dominant group may leave little time or energy to attend to one's self. Worse yet, the negative messages of the dominant group about the subordinates may be internalized, leading to self-doubt or, in its extreme form, self-hate. There are many examples of subordinates attempting to make themselves over in the image of the dominant group—Jewish people who want to change the Semitic look

of their noses, Asians who have cosmetic surgery to alter the shapes of their eyes, Blacks who seek to lighten their skin with bleaching creams, women who want to smoke and drink “like a man.” Whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, the fact is that dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing.

...
The history of subordinate groups is filled with so-called troublemakers, yet their names are often unknown. Preserving the record of those subordinates and their dominant allies who have challenged the status quo is usually of little interest to the dominant culture, but it is of great interest to subordinates who search for an empowering reflection in the societal mirror.

Many of us are both dominant and subordinate. As Audre Lorde said, from her vantage point as a Black lesbian, “There is no hierarchy of oppressions.” The thread and threat of violence runs through all of the isms. There is a need to acknowledge each other’s pain, even as we attend to our own.

For those readers who are in the dominant racial category, it may sometimes be difficult to take in what is being said by and about those who are targeted by racism. When the perspective of the subordinate is shared directly, an image is reflected to members of the dominant group that is disconcerting. To the extent that one can draw on one’s own experience of subordination—as a young person, as a person with a disability, as someone who grew up poor, as a woman—it may be easier to make meaning of another targeted group’s experience. For those readers who are targeted by racism and are angered by the obliviousness of Whites, it may be useful to attend to your experience of dominance where you may find it—as a heterosexual, as an able-bodied person, as a Christian, as a man—and consider what systems of privilege you may be overlooking. The task of resisting our own oppression does not relieve us of the responsibility of acknowledging our complicity in the oppression of others.

Our ongoing examination of who we are in our full humanity, embracing all of our identities, creates the possibility of building alliances that may ultimately free us all.

2

Identities and Social Locations

Who Am I? Who Are My People?

Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey

...
Identity formation is the result of a complex interplay among individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, and societal categorization, classification, and socialization. It is an ongoing process that involves several key questions:

Who am I? Who do I want to be?
Who do others think I am and want me to be?

Who and what do societal and community institutions, such as schools, religious institutions, the media, and the law, say I am?
 Where/what/who are my "home" and "community"?
 Which social group(s) do I want to affiliate with?
 Who decides the answers to these questions, and on what basis?

Answers to these questions form the core of our existence. . . .

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1993) defines *identity* as

the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitely known or recognizable;
 a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group;
 . . .

The same dictionary defines *to identify* as "to associate or affiliate (oneself) closely with a person or group; to establish an identification with another or others."

These definitions point to the connections between us as individuals and how we are perceived by other people and classified by societal institutions. They also involve a sense of individual agency and choice regarding affiliations with others. Gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and language are all significant social categories by which people are recognized by others. Indeed, on the basis of these categories alone, others often think they know who we are and how we should behave. Personal decisions about our affiliations and loyalties to specific groups are also shaped by these categories. For example, in many communities of color women struggle over the question of race versus gender. Is race a more important factor than gender in shaping their lives? If a Latina speaks out publicly about sexism within the Latino community, is she betraying her people? This separation of categories, mirrored by our segregated social lives, tends to set up false dichotomies in which people often feel that they have to choose one aspect of their identity over another. It also presents difficulties for mixed-race or bisexual people, who do not fit neatly into such narrow categories.
 . . .

BEING MYSELF: THE MICRO LEVEL

At the micro level, individuals usually feel the most comfortable as themselves. Here one can say, for example, "I am a woman, heterosexual, middle class, with a movement disability; but I am also much more than those categories." At this level we define ourselves and structure our daily activities according to our own preferences. At the micro level we can best feel and experience the process of identity formation, which includes naming specific forces and events that shape our identities. At this level we also seem to have more control of the process, although there are always interconnections between events and experiences at this level and the other levels.

Critical life events, such as entering kindergarten, losing a parent through death, separation, or divorce, or the onset of puberty, may all serve as catalysts for a shift in how we think about ourselves. A five-year-old Vietnamese American child from a traditional home and community may experience the first challenge to her sense of identity when her kindergarten teacher admonishes her to speak only in English. A White, middle-class professional woman who thinks of herself as "a person" and a "competent attorney" may begin

to see the significance of gender and “the glass ceiling” for women when she witnesses younger, less experienced male colleagues in her law office passing her by for promotions. A woman who has been raped who attends her first meeting of a campus group organizing against date rape feels the power of connection with other rape survivors and their allies. An eighty-year-old woman, whose partner of fifty years has just died, must face the reality of having lost her lifetime companion, friend, and lover. Such experiences shape each person’s ongoing formulation of self, whether or not the process is conscious, deliberate, reflective, or even voluntary.

Identity formation is a lifelong endeavor that includes discovery of the new; recovery of the old, forgotten, or appropriated; and synthesis of the new and old, as illustrated by several writers in this chapter who reflect on how their sense of identity has developed over the course of their lives. At especially important junctures during the process, individuals mark an identity change in tangible ways. An African American woman may change her name from the anglicized Susan to Aisha, with roots in African culture. A Chinese Vietnamese immigrant woman, on the other hand, may adopt an anglicized name, exchanging Nu Lu for Yvonne Lu as part of becoming a U.S. citizen. Another way of marking and effecting a shift in identity is by altering your physical appearance: changing your wardrobe or makeup; cutting your hair very short, wearing it natural rather than permed or pressed, dyeing it purple, or letting the gray show after years of using hair coloring. . . .

COMMUNITY RECOGNITION, EXPECTATIONS, AND INTERACTIONS: THE MESO LEVEL

It is at the meso level—at school, in the workplace, or on the street—that people most frequently ask “Who are you?” or “Where are you from?” in an attempt to categorize us and determine their relationship to us. Moreover, it is here that people experience the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of multiple identities, which we consider later.

The single most visible signifier of identity is physical appearance. . . . Questions such as “Where do you come from?” and questioning behaviors, such as feeling the texture of your hair or asking if you speak a particular language, are commonly used to interrogate people whose physical appearances especially, but also behaviors, do not match the characteristics designated as belonging to established categories. At root, we are being asked, “Are you one of us or not?” These questioners usually expect singular and simplistic answers, assuming that everyone will fit existing social categories, which are conceived of as undifferentiated and unambiguous. Among people with disabilities, for example, people wanting to identify each other may expect to hear details of another’s disability rather than the fact that the person being questioned also identifies equally strongly as, say, a woman who is White, working class, and bisexual.

Community, like home, may be geographic and emotional, or both, and provides a way for people to express group affiliations. “Where are you from?” is a commonplace question in the United States among strangers, a way to break the ice and start a conversation, expecting answers like “I’m from Tallahassee, Florida,” or “I’m from the Bronx.” Community might also be an organized group like Alcoholics Anonymous, a religious group, or a political organization like the African American civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Community may be something much more abstract, as in “the women’s community” or “the queer community,” where there is presumed to be an identifiable group. In all of these examples there is an assumption of some kind of shared values, goals, interests, culture, or language.

At the community level, individual identities and needs meet group standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands. You compare yourself with others and are

subtly compared. Others size up your clothing, accent, personal style, and knowledge of the group's history and culture. You may be challenged directly, "You say you're Latina. How come you don't speak Spanish?" "You say you're working class. What are you doing in a professional job?" These experiences may both affirm our identities and create or highlight inconsistencies, incongruities, and contradictions in who we believe we are, how we are viewed by others, our role and status in the community, and our sense of belonging.

SOCIAL CATEGORIES, CLASSIFICATIONS, AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY: MACRO AND GLOBAL LEVELS

Classifying and labeling human beings, often according to real or assumed physical, biological, or genetic differences, is a way to distinguish who is included and who is excluded from a group, to ascribe particular characteristics, to prescribe social roles, and to assign status, power, and privilege. People are to know their places. Thus social categories such as gender, race, and class are used to establish and maintain a particular kind of social order. The classifications and their specific features, meanings, and significance are socially constructed through history, politics, and culture. The specific meanings and significance were often imputed to justify the conquest, colonization, domination, and exploitation of entire groups of people, and although the specifics may have changed over time, this system of categorizing and classifying remains intact. For example, Native American people were described as brutal, uncivilized, and ungovernable savages in the writings of early colonizers on this continent. This justified the genocide of Native Americans by White settlers and the U.S. military and public officials, as well as the breaking of treaties between the U.S. government and Native American tribes. Today, Native Americans are no longer called savages but are often thought of as a vanishing species, or a non-existent people, already wiped out, thereby rationalizing their neglect by the dominant culture and erasing their long-standing and continuing resistance. . . .

These social categories are at the foundation of the structural inequalities present in our society. In each category there is one group of people deemed superior, legitimate, dominant, and privileged while others are relegated—whether explicitly or implicitly—to the position of inferior, illegitimate, subordinate, and disadvantaged.

Category	Dominant	Subordinate
Gender	Men	Women, transgender people
Race	White	Peoples of color
Class	Middle and upper class	Poor, working class
Nation	U.S./First World	Second, third Worlds
Ethnicity	European	All other ethnicities
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
Religion	Christian	All other religions
Physical ability	Able-bodied	Persons with disabilities
Age	Youth	Elderly persons
Language	English	All other languages

This hierarchy of advantage and disadvantage has meant that the preponderance of analytical writing about identity has been done by those in subordinate positions: women of color, lesbians, bisexual women, and working-class women. . . . For White people descended from European immigrants to this country, the advantages of being White are not always fully recognized or acknowledged. . . . As a result, White people in the United States tend to think of all identities as equal: "I'm Italian American, you're Polish American. I'm Irish American, you're African American." This assumed equivalence ignores the very big differences between an individualist symbolic identity and a socially enforced and imposed racial identity. . . .

MAINTAINING SYSTEMS OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Maintaining this system of inequality requires the objectification and dehumanization of subordinated peoples. Appropriating their identities is a particularly effective method of doing this, for it defines who the subordinated group/person is or ought to be. This happens in several ways:

Using the values, characteristics, features of the dominant group as the supposedly neutral standard against which all others should be evaluated. For example, men are generally physically larger and stronger than women. Many of the clinical trials for new pharmaceutical drugs are conducted using men's bodies and activities as the standard. The results, however, are applied equally to both men and women. Women are often prescribed the same dosage of a medication as men are even though their physical makeup is not the same. Thus women, as a distinct group, do not exist in this research.

Using terms that distinguish the subordinate from the dominant group. Terms such as "non-White" and "minority" connote a relationship to another group, White in the former case and majority in the latter. A non-White person is the negative of the White person; a minority person is less than a majority person. Neither has an identity on her or his own terms.

Stereotyping. Stereotyping involves making a simple generalization about a group and claiming that all members of the group conform to this generalization. Stereotypes are behavioral and psychological attributes; they are commonly held beliefs about groups rather than individual beliefs about individuals; and they persist in spite of contradictory evidence. Lesbians hate men. Latinas are dominated by macho Latinos. Women with physical disabilities are asexual. Fat women are good-humored but not healthy. As Andre asserts, "A 'stereotype' is pejorative; there is always something objectionable in the beliefs and images to which the word refers."

Exoticizing and romanticizing. These two forms of appropriation are particularly insidious because on the surface there is an appearance of appreciation. For example, Asian American women are described as personifying the "mysterious orient," Native American women as "earth mothers" and the epitome of spirituality, and Black women as perpetual towers of strength. In all three cases, seemingly positive traits and cultural practices are identified and exalted. This "positive" stereotyping prevents people from seeing the truth and complexity of who these women are.

Given the significance of identity appropriation as an aspect of oppression, it is not surprising that many liberation struggles have included projects and efforts aimed at changing identities and taking control of the process of positive identity formation and representation. Before liberation struggles, oppressed people often use the same terminology to name

themselves as the dominant group uses to label them. One crucial aspect of liberation struggles is to get rid of pejorative labels and use names that express, in their own terms, who people are in all their humanity. Thus the name a group uses for itself gradually takes on more of an insider perspective that fits the evolving consciousness growing out of the political movement.

As with individual identity, naming ourselves collectively is an important act of empowerment. One example of this is the evolution of the names African Americans have used to identify themselves, moving from Colored, to Negro, to Black to Afro-American, and African American. Similarly, Chinese Americans gradually rejected the derogatory label "Chink," preferring to be called Orientals and now Chinese Americans or Asians. These terms are used unevenly, sometimes according to the age and political orientation of the person or the geographic region, where one usage may be more popular than another. Among the very diverse group of people connected historically, culturally, and linguistically to Spain, Portugal, and their former colonies (parts of the United States, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America), some use more inclusive terms such as Latino or Hispanic; others prefer more specific names such as Chicano, Puerto Rican, Nicaraguan, Cuban, and so on. . . .

COLONIZATION, IMMIGRATION, AND THE U.S. LANDSCAPE OF RACE AND CLASS

Other macro-level factors affecting people's identities include colonization and immigration. . . . This ideology that the United States is "a land of immigrants" obscures several important issues excluded from much mainstream debate about immigration: Not all Americans came to this country voluntarily. Native American peoples and Mexicans were already here on this continent, but the former experienced near genocide and the latter were made foreigners in their own land. African peoples were captured, enslaved, and forcibly imported to this country to be laborers. All were brutally exploited and violated—physically, psychologically, culturally, and spiritually—to serve the interests of those in power. The relationships between these groups and this nation and their experiences in the United States are fundamentally different from the experiences of those who chose to immigrate here, though this is not to negate the hardships the latter may have faced. These differences profoundly shaped the social, cultural, political, and economic realities faced by these groups throughout history and continue to do so today.

. . . Early in the history of this country, for example, the Naturalization Law of 1790 (which was repealed as recently as 1952) prohibited peoples of color from becoming U.S. citizens, and the Slave Codes restricted every aspect of life for enslaved African peoples. These laws made race into an indelible line that separated "insiders" from "outsiders." White people were designated insiders and granted many privileges while all others were confined to systematic disadvantage. As Mary C. Waters points out, the stories that White Americans learn of how their grandparents and great-grandparents triumphed in the United States "are usually told in terms of their individual efforts." The role of labor unions, community organizations, and political parties, as well as the crucial importance of racism, is usually left out of these accounts, which emphasize individual effort and hard work.

On coming to the United States, immigrants are drawn into the racial landscape of this country. In media debates and official statistics, this is still dominated by a Black/White polarization in which everyone is assumed to fit into one of these two groups. Demographically, the situation is much more complex and diverse, but people of color,

who comprise the more inclusive group, are still set off against White people, the dominant group. Immigrants identify themselves according to nationality—for example, as Cambodian or Guatemalan. Once in the United States they learn the significance of racial divisions in this country and may adopt the term *people of color* as an aspect of their identity here. . . .

This emphasis on race tends to mask differences based on class, another important distinction among immigrant groups. For example, the Chinese and Japanese people who came in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to work on plantations in Hawai'i, as loggers in Oregon, or building roads and railroads in several western states were poor and from rural areas of China and Japan. The 1965 immigration law made way for "the second wave" of Asian immigration. It set preferences for professionals, highly skilled workers, and members of the middle and upper-middle classes, making this group "the most highly skilled of any immigrant group our country has ever had." The first wave of Vietnamese refugees who immigrated between the mid-1970s and 1980 were from the middle and upper classes, and many were professionals; by contrast, the second wave of immigrants from Vietnam was composed of poor and rural people. The class backgrounds of immigrants affect not only their sense of themselves and their expectations but also how they can succeed as strangers in a foreign land. For example, a poor woman who arrives with no literacy skills in her own language will have a more difficult time learning to become literate in English than one who has several years of formal schooling in her country of origin that may have included basic English.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, SOCIAL LOCATION, AND CONTRADICTIONS

The social features of one's identity incorporate individual, community, societal, and global factors, as discussed in the accounts that follow. The point where all the features embodied in a person overlap is called social location. Imagine a diagram made up of overlapping circles, with a circle representing one specific feature of identity such as gender, class, ability, age, and so on. A person's social location is the point at which a part of each circle touches all others—where all elements are present simultaneously. Social location is a way of expressing the core of a person's existence in the social and political world. It places us in particular relationships to others, to the dominant culture of the United States, and to the rest of the world. It determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise, as well as situations in which we have less power and privilege.

Because social location is where all the aspects of one's identity meet, our experience of our own complex identities is sometimes contradictory, conflictual, and paradoxical. We live with multiple identities that can be both enriching and contradictory and that push us to confront questions of loyalty to individuals and groups. . . .

The Social Construction of Difference

Allan G. Johnson

The late African American novelist James Baldwin once offered the provocative idea that there is no such thing as whiteness or, for that matter, blackness or, more generally, race. "No one is white before he/she came to America," he wrote. "It took generations and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country."

... Baldwin isn't denying the reality that skin pigmentation varies from one person to another. What he is saying is that unless you live in a culture that recognizes such differences as significant, they are socially irrelevant and therefore, in a way, do not exist. A "black woman" in Africa, therefore, who has not experienced white racism, does not *think* of herself as black or experience herself as black, nor do the people around her. African, yes, a woman, yes. But not a *black* woman.

When she comes to the United States, however, where privilege is organized according to race, suddenly she becomes black because people assign her to a social category that bears that name, and they treat her differently as a result. . . .

So Baldwin is telling us that race and all its categories have no significance outside systems of privilege and oppression in which they were created in the first place. This is what sociologists call the "social construction" of reality.

... The same is true with the definition of what is considered "normal." While it may come as a surprise to many who think of themselves as nondisabled, disability and nondisability are socially constructed. This doesn't mean that the difference between having or not having full use of your legs is somehow "made up" without any objective reality. It does mean, however, that how people notice and label and think about such differences and how they treat other people as a result depend entirely on ideas contained in a system's culture.

Human beings, for example, come in a variety of heights, and many of those considered "normal" are unable to reach high places such as kitchen shelves without the assistance of physical aids—chairs and step-stools. In spite of their inability to do this simple task without special aids, they are not defined as disabled. Nor are the roughly 100 million people in the United States who cannot see properly without the aid of eyeglasses. . . .

Disability and nondisability are . . . constructed through the language used to describe people. When someone who cannot see is labeled a "blind person," for example, it creates the impression that not being able to see sums up the entire person. In other words, blind becomes what they *are*. The same thing happens when people are described as "brain damaged" or "crippled" or "retarded" or "deaf"—the person becomes the disability and nothing more. Reducing people to a single dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as "other," as different from "normal" (white, heterosexual, male, nondisabled) people and therefore as inferior. . . .

There is a world of difference between using a wheelchair and being treated as a normal human being (who happens to use a wheelchair to get around) and using a wheelchair and being treated as invisible, inferior, unintelligent, asexual, frightening, passive, dependent, and nothing more than your disability. And that difference is not a matter of the disability itself but of how it is constructed in society and how we then make use of that construction

in our minds to shape how we think about ourselves and other people and how we treat them as a result.

What makes socially constructed reality so powerful is that we rarely if ever experience it as that. We think the way our culture defines something like race or gender is simply the way things are in some objective sense. . . . In the 19th century, for example, U.S. law identified those having *any* African ancestry as black, a standard known as the “one-drop rule,” which defined “white” as a state of absolute purity in relation to “black.” Native American status, in contrast, required at *least* one-eighth Native American ancestry in order to qualify. Why the different standards? . . . Native Americans could claim financial benefits from the federal government, making it to whites’ advantage to make it hard for anyone to be considered Native American. Designating someone as black, however, took *away* power and *denied* the right to make claims against whites, including white families of origin. In both cases, racial classification has had little to do with objective characteristics and everything to do with preserving white power and wealth.

This fact has also been true of the use of race to tag various ethnic groups. When the Chinese were imported as cheap laborers during the 19th century, the California Supreme Court declared them not white. Mexicans, however, many of whom owned large amounts of land in California and did business with whites, were considered white. Today, as Paul Kivel points out, Mexicans are no longer considered white and the Chinese are “conditionally white at times.”

...

WHAT IS PRIVILEGE?

No matter what privileged group you belong to, if you want to understand the problem of privilege and difference, the first stumbling block is usually the idea of privilege itself. When people hear that they belong to a privileged group or benefit from something like “white privilege” or “male privilege,” they don’t get it, or they feel angry and defensive about what they do get. *Privilege* has become one of those loaded words we need to reclaim so that we can use it to name and illuminate the truth. . . .

Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do. If people take me more seriously when I give a speech than they would someone of color saying the same things in the same way, then I’m benefiting from white privilege. That a heterosexual black woman can feel free to talk about her life in ways that reveal the fact that she’s married to a man is a form of heterosexual privilege because lesbians and gay men cannot casually reveal their sexual orientation without putting themselves at risk.

...

WHAT PRIVILEGE LOOKS LIKE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

. . . Privilege shows up in the daily details of people’s lives in almost every social setting. Consider the following examples of race privilege. . . .

- Whites are less likely than blacks to be arrested; once arrested, they are less likely to be convicted and, once convicted, less likely to go to prison, regardless of the crime or circumstances. Whites, for example, constitute 85 percent of those who use illegal drugs, but less than half of those in prison on drug-use charges are white.

...

- Whites are more likely than comparable blacks to have loan applications approved and less likely to be given poor information or the runaround during the application process.
- Whites are charged lower prices for new and used cars than are people of color, and residential segregation gives whites access to higher-quality goods of all kinds at cheaper prices.
- ...
- Whites are more likely to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and to have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, including those that were suggested previously by a person of color and ignored or dismissed.
- Whites can usually assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will be of their race.
- ...
- Whites can assume that when they go shopping, they'll be treated as serious customers not as potential shoplifters or people without the money to make a purchase. When they try to cash a check or use a credit card, they can assume they won't be hassled for additional identification and will be given the benefit of the doubt.
- ...
- Most whites are not segregated into communities that isolate them from the best job opportunities, schools, and community services.
- Whites have greater access to quality education and health care.
- ...
- Whites can succeed without other people being surprised.
- Whites don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention to their race. They can simply take their race for granted as unremarkable to the extent of experiencing themselves as not even having a race. Unlike some of my African American students, for example, I don't have people coming up to me and treating me as if I were some exotic "other," gushing about how "cool" or different I am, wanting to know where I'm "from," and reaching out to touch my hair.
- Whites don't find themselves slotted into occupations identified with their race, as blacks are often slotted into support positions or Asians into technical jobs.
- ...
- Whites can reasonably expect that if they work hard and "play by the rules," they'll get what they deserve, and they feel justified in complaining if they don't. It is something other racial groups cannot realistically expect.

In the following list for male privilege, note how some items repeat from the list on race but other items do not.

- In most professions and upper-level occupations, men are held to a lower standard than women. It is easier for a "good but not great" male lawyer to make partner than it is for a comparable woman.
- Men are charged lower prices for new and used cars.
- If men do poorly at something or make a mistake or commit a crime, they can generally assume that people won't attribute the failure to their gender. The kids who shoot teachers and schoolmates are almost always boys, but rarely is the fact that all this violence is being done by males raised as an important issue.
- ...
- Men can generally assume that when they go out in public, they won't be sexually harassed or assaulted just because they're male, and if they are victimized, they won't be asked to explain what they were doing there.

- Male representation in government and the ruling circles of corporations and other organizations is disproportionately high.
- ...
- Men are more likely than women are to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and to have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, even those that were suggested previously by a woman and dismissed or ignored.
- Most men can assume that their gender won't be used to determine whether they'll fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.
- Men can succeed without other people being surprised.
- Men don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention drawn to their gender (for example, to how sexually attractive they are).
- Men don't find themselves slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with their gender as women are slotted into community relations, human resources, social work, elementary school teaching, librarianship, nursing, and clerical, and secretarial positions.
- ...
- The standards used to evaluate men as *men* are consistent with the standards used to evaluate them in other roles such as occupations. Standards used to evaluate women as women are often different from those used to evaluate them in other roles. For example, a man can be both a "real man" and a successful and aggressive lawyer, while an aggressive woman lawyer may succeed as a lawyer but be judged as not measuring up as a woman.

In the following list regarding sexual orientation, note again items in common with the other two lists and items peculiar to this form of privilege.

- Heterosexuals are free to reveal and live their intimate relationships openly—by referring to their partners by name, recounting experiences, going out in public together, displaying pictures on their desks at work—without being accused of "flaunting" their sexuality or risking discrimination.
- Heterosexuals can marry as a way to commit to long-term relationships that are socially recognized, supported, and legitimated. This fact confers basic rights such as spousal health benefits, the ability to adopt children, inheritance, joint filing of income tax returns, and the power to make decisions for a spouse who is incapacitated in a medical emergency.
- ...
- Heterosexuals can move about in public without fear of being harassed or physically attacked because of their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexuals don't run the risk of being reduced to a single aspect of their lives, as if being heterosexual summed up the kind of person they are. Instead, they can be viewed and treated as complex human beings who happen to be heterosexual.
- Heterosexuals can usually assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will be assumed to be heterosexual.
- Most heterosexuals can assume that their sexual orientation won't be used to determine whether they'll fit in at work or whether teammates will feel comfortable working with them.
- Heterosexuals don't have to worry that their sexual orientation will be used as a weapon against them, to undermine their achievements or power.
- ...
- Heterosexuals can live where they want without having to worry about neighbors who disapprove of their sexual orientation.

- Heterosexuals can live in the comfort of knowing that other people's assumptions about their sexual orientation are correct.

In the following list regarding disability status, note again items in common with the other lists and items peculiar to this form of privilege.

- Nondisabled people can choose whether to be conscious of their disability status or to ignore it and regard themselves simply as human beings.
- Nondisabled people can live secure in other people's assumption that they are sexual beings capable of an active sex life, including the potential to have children and be parents.
- ...
- Nondisabled people can assume that they will fit in at work and in other settings without having to worry about being evaluated and judged according to preconceived notions and stereotypes about people with disabilities.
- ...
- Nondisabled people don't have to deal with an endless and exhausting stream of attention to their disability status. They can simply take their disability status for granted as unremarkable to the extent of experiencing themselves as not even having one.
- Nondisabled people can ask for help without having to worry that people will assume they need help with everything.
- Nondisabled people can succeed without people being surprised because of low expectations of their ability to contribute to society.
- Nondisabled people can expect to pay lower prices for cars because they are assumed to be mentally unimpaired and less likely to allow themselves to be misled and exploited.
- ...
- Nondisabled people are more likely to control conversations and be allowed to get away with it and have their ideas and contributions taken seriously, including those that were suggested before by a person with disabilities and then dismissed or ignored.
- Nondisabled people can assume that national heroes, success models, and other figures held up for general admiration will share their disability status.
- ...
- Nondisabled people can generally assume that when they go out in public, they won't be looked at as odd or out of place or not belonging. They can also assume that most buildings and other structures will not be designed in ways that limit their access.
- Nondisabled people can assume that when they need to travel from one place to another, they will have access to buses, trains, airplanes, and other means of transportation.
- Nondisabled people can count on being taken seriously and not treated as children.
- Nondisabled people are less likely to be segregated into living situations—such as nursing homes and special schools and sports programs—that isolate them from job opportunities, schools, community services, and the everyday workings of life in a society.

...
Regardless of which group we're talking about, privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and respect in the world, to operate within a relatively wide comfort zone. Privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they're applied. Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgements stick. It allows people to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience. Privilege means being able to decide

who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom and for what. And it grants a presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged.

To have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider, as exceptional or “other” to be excluded, or to be included but always with conditions. . . .

OPPRESSION: THE FLIP SIDE OF PRIVILEGE

For every social category that is privileged, one or more other categories are oppressed in relation to it. . . . Just as privilege tends to open doors of opportunity, oppression tends to slam them shut.

Like privilege, oppression results from the social relationship between privileged and oppressed categories, which makes it possible for individuals to vary in their personal experience of being oppressed (“I’ve never been oppressed as a woman”). This also means, however, that in order to have the experience of being oppressed, it is necessary to belong to an oppressed category. In other words, men cannot be oppressed *as men*, just as whites cannot be oppressed as whites or heterosexuals as heterosexuals, because a group can be oppressed only if there exists another group with the power to oppress them.

As we saw earlier, people in privileged categories can certainly feel bad in ways that can feel oppressive. Men, for example, can feel burdened by what they take to be their responsibility to provide for their families. Or they can feel limited and even damaged by the requirement that “real men” must avoid expressing feelings other than anger. But although access to privilege costs them something that may *feel* oppressive, to call it oppression distorts the nature of what is happening to them and why.

...
The complexity of systems of privilege makes it possible, of course, for men to experience oppression if they also happen to be of color or gay or disabled or in a lower social class, but not simply because they are male. In the same way, whites can experience oppression for many reasons, but not because they’re white.

...
Finally, being in a privileged category that has an oppressive relationship with another isn’t the same as being an oppressive *person* who behaves in oppressive ways. That males as a social category oppress females as a social category, for example, is a social fact. That doesn’t, however, tell us how a particular man thinks or feels about particular women or behaves toward them. This can be a subtle distinction to hang on to, but hang on to it we must if we’re going to maintain a clear idea of what oppression is and how it works in defense of privilege.

...

Theoretical Foundations

Lee Anne Bell

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE?

We believe that social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live. These are conditions we wish not only for our own society but also for every society in our interdependent global community.

...

We realize that developing a social justice process in a society and world steeped in oppression is no simple feat. For this reason, we need clear ways to define and analyze oppression so that we can understand how it operates at individual, cultural, and institutional levels, historically and in the present. Although inevitably an oversimplification of a complex social phenomenon, we believe that the conceptual frameworks presented here can help us make sense of and, hopefully, act more effectively against oppressive circumstances as these arise in our teaching and activism.

WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION NEEDS A THEORY OF OPPRESSION

Practice is always shaped by theory, whether formal or informal, tacit or expressed. How we approach social justice education, the problems we identify as needing remedy, the solutions we entertain as viable, and the methods we choose as appropriate for reaching those solutions are all theoretical as well as practical questions. Theory and practice intertwine as parts of the interactive and historical process that Freire calls "praxis."

DEFINING FEATURES OF OPPRESSION

PERVASIVE

We use the term *oppression* rather than discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry to emphasize the pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. The term *oppression* encapsulates

the fusion of institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life in our society. . . . Woven together through time and reinforced in the present, these patterns provide an example of the pervasive of oppression.

RESTRICTIVE

On the most general level, oppression denotes structural and material constraints that significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility. Oppression restricts both self-development and self-determination. It delimits who one can imagine becoming and the power to act in support of one's rights and aspirations. A girl-child in the United States in 2006, for example, especially if she is poor or of color, is still unlikely to imagine herself as president since, unlike many other countries, we have yet to elect a woman to this high office. 140 years after the abolition of slavery, African Americans as a group have still not achieved full equality and cannot even rely on their government for basic human treatment and aid in a time of crisis, as in the recent scandalous government desertion of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Despite rhetoric that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough, a father's economic status continues to be the best predictor of the status of his offspring, a situation that worsens as economic inequality grows and the possibilities for social mobility steadily decline.

HIERARCHICAL

Oppression signifies a hierarchical relationship in which dominant or privileged groups reap advantage, often in unconscious ways, from the disempowerment of targeted groups. Whites, for example, gain privilege as a dominant group because they benefit from access to social power and privilege, not equally available to people of color. As a group, Whites earn more money and accumulate more assets than other racial groups, hold the majority of positions of power and influence, and command the controlling institutions in society. White-dominated institutions restrict the life expectancy, infant mortality, income, housing, employment, and educational opportunities of people of color.

COMPLEX, MULTIPLE, CROSS-CUTTING RELATIONSHIPS

Power and privilege are relative, however, because individuals hold multiple complex and cross-cutting social group memberships that confer relative privilege or disadvantage differently in different contexts. Identity is not simply additive but multiplicative. An upper-class professional man who is African American, for example (still a very small percentage of African Americans overall), may enjoy economic success and professional status conferred through male, class, and perhaps dominant language and citizenship privilege as an English-speaking native-born citizen, yet face limitations not endured by white, male and female, or foreign national coworkers. Despite economic and professional status and success, he may be threatened by police, be unable to hail a taxi, and endure hateful epithets as he walks down the street. The constellation of identities that shape his consciousness and experience as an African American man, and his varying access to privilege, may fluctuate depending upon whether he is light or dark skinned, Ivy League-educated or a high school dropout, incarcerated, unemployed, or a tourist in South Africa, Brazil, or Europe.

INTERNALIZED

Oppression not only resides in external social institutions and norms but lodges in the human psyche as well. Oppressive beliefs are internalized by victims as well as perpetrators. The idea that poor people somehow deserve and are responsible for poverty, rather than the economic system that structures and requires it, is learned by poor and affluent alike. Homophobia, the deep fear and hatred of homosexuality, is internalized by both straight and gay people. Jews as well as Gentiles absorb antisemitic stereotypes.

...

SHARED AND DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF "ISMS"

In grappling with these questions, we have come to believe in the explanatory and political value of identifying both the particular histories and characteristics of specific forms of oppression such as ableism or classism, as well as the patterns that connect and mutually reinforce different oppressions in a system that is inclusive and pervasive. In this book we examine the unique ways in which oppression is manifested through racism, white privilege, and immigrant status; sexism, heterosexism, and transgender experiences; religious oppression and antisemitism; and classism, ableism, and ageism/adultism.

We look at the dimensions of experience that connect these "isms" in an overarching system of domination. For example, we examine the roles of a dominant or advantaged group and (a) subordinated or targeted group(s) in each form of oppression and the differentials of power and privilege that are dynamic features of oppression, whatever its particular form. At the same time, we try to highlight the distinctive qualities and appreciate the historical and social contingencies that distinguish one form of oppression from another. In this model, diversity and the appreciation of differences are inextricably tied to social justice and the unequal ways that power and privilege construct difference in our society.

From our perspective, no one form of oppression is the base for all others, yet all are connected within a system that makes them possible. We align with theorists such as Young who describe distinctive ingredients of oppression without prioritizing one over another. We also share with Young the view that eradicating oppression ultimately requires struggle against all its forms, and that coalitions among diverse people offer the most promising strategies for challenging oppression systematically. Therefore, we highlight theory and practice that demonstrate interconnections among different forms of oppression and suggest common strategies to oppose it collectively.

...

CONSTRUCTING AN INCLUSIVE THEORY OF OPPRESSION

We touch on concepts from writing and activism in the Civil Rights, New Left, and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and from more recent movements for equality and social change, to discern lessons about oppression that provide a conceptual framework for understanding its operations. Tracking the history of ideas developed in these movements grounds our theoretical understanding in lived experience and highlights the contradictions and conflicts in different approaches to oppression and social justice as these are lived out in practice over time and place. Here, we highlight broad themes drawn from rich and well-developed academic and social movement traditions to which we are indebted.

RACISM

The social science literature on racism and insights about racism that emerged from the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s profoundly shaped the way scholars and activists have come to understand oppression and its other manifestations. The Civil Rights movement fired the imagination of millions of Americans, who applied its lessons to an understanding of their particular situations and adapted its analyses and tactics to their own struggles for equality. For example, Native American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican youth styled themselves after the African American youth in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Panther Party. The predominantly white student antiwar movement drew directly from the experiences of the black freedom struggles to shape their goals and strategies. Early women's liberation groups were spawned within SNCC itself, as black and white women applied the analyses of racial inequality to their own positions as women, as did Latinas within the Puerto Rican Youth. The gay liberation and disability rights movements credit the Civil Rights movement as a model for their organizing and activism, and poor people's and welfare rights movements likewise drew upon this heritage as do immigrant and youth activists today.

Of the many valuable legacies of the Civil Rights movement and the academic traditions focusing on racism, we highlight here two key themes. One is the awareness that racism is a system of oppression that not only stigmatizes and violates the targeted group, but also does psychic and ethical violence to the dominator group as well. The idea that oppression affects, albeit in different ways, both those advantaged and those targeted by oppression has been useful to many other groups as a way to make sense of their experiences of oppression.

The second broad theme is that racism functions not only through overt, conscious prejudice and discrimination but also through the unconscious attitudes and behaviors of a society that presumes an unacknowledged but pervasive white cultural norm. Racial images and ideas are embedded in language and cultural practices promoted as neutral and inclusive. However, the alleged neutrality of social patterns, behaviors, and assumptions in fact define and reinforce a form of cultural imperialism that supports white supremacy. Identifying unmarked and unacknowledged norms that bolster the power position of advantaged groups is an important strategy for examining other forms of oppression as well. Feminists, for example, use the idea to examine practices of male supremacy and patriarchy, and gay and lesbian rights activists use it to analyze heterosexual privilege.

The concept of racial formation has become an important analytic tool. This concept is useful for thinking about the ways in which racism is constructed and reconstructed in different contexts and periods. It works against the tendency to essentialize current social relations as given and encourages ideas about alternative ways to frame and understand human relations against systems of oppression. Critical race theory, Lat Crit theory, and Whiteness studies offer other important tools for analyzing oppression through the use of story to represent how racism operates and to invent alternative scenarios of possibility. . . .

CLASSISM

The New Left movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s espoused ideals of political democracy and personal liberty and applied their political energy to make power socially accountable. New Left critiques of power built on Marxist theory to examine issues of domination and exploitation and to focus on the structural rather than individual factors

that maintain oppressive economic and social relations. They also exposed and critiqued normative assumptions that conflate democracy with capitalism and its role in suppressing the exploration of alternative economic and social arrangements.

New Left analyses examine how power operates through normalizing relations of domination and systematizing ideas and practices that are then taken as given. These analyses remind us to continually ask the question "In whose interest do prevailing systems operate?" The question of power and the interests it serves has been a useful analytic tool for examining oppression in all of its multiple forms. Asking who benefits and who pays for prevailing practices helps to expose the hierarchical relationships as well as the hidden advantages and penalties embedded in a purportedly fair and neutral system.

Postcolonial scholars and activists have extended these questions to an analysis of the power dynamics within global relations of transnational capital and their impact on labor, migration, gender and ethnic relations, environmental issues, and national development around the globe. These analyses of how power circulates alert us to the evershifting ways in which power maintains itself in support of the status quo and to the flexibility and persistence necessary to continually challenge its operations.

SEXISM

The women's liberation movement developed important theoretical and analytic tools for a general theory of oppression and liberation. Through consciousness-raising groups, women collectively uncovered and deconstructed the ways that the system of patriarchy is reproduced inside women's consciousness as well as in external social institutions, and challenged conventional assumptions about human nature, sexuality, family life, and gender roles and relations. Consciousness-raising groups developed a process for naming how members of targeted groups can collude in maintaining an unequal system, identifying the psychological as well as social factors that contribute to internalizing oppressive beliefs, and exploring how to raise consciousness to resist and challenge such systems both inside our own consciousness and externally in the world. Feminist practice also sought to create and enact new, more liberated ways of thinking and behaving. Insights from feminist theory and practice have been fruitfully used by other groups to raise consciousness, develop analyses of psychological and social assumptions and practices of their group(s) as these collude in maintaining oppression, and experiment with alternative practices.

MULTIPLE ISSUES

Women of color, lesbians, Jewish feminists, and poor and working-class women brought forth critiques from within the women's movement to critique unitary theories of feminism, stressing the multiple and diverse perspectives, needs, and goals of women from different social groups. These challenges have been used to critique unitary theories of class, race, and gender and to generate a range of analyses and ideas about oppression(s) that take into account both the multiple identities people hold and the range of experiences of oppression lived within any given group. Women of color who are lesbian and poor, for example, experience oppression in multiple and distinctive ways that demand more complex analyses of the mechanisms of oppression in the lives of diverse groups of people. Global feminism and global critical race feminism both critique and add to the strategies

and theories developed by previous feminists, highlighting the leadership of women at the margins, building transnational consciousness of shared and distinctive problems women face under postcolonial systems and U.S. imperialism, and developing strategies and solutions locally to address the particularities of their national contexts.

Postcolonial studies and postmodern theories, and ongoing discussions among people in various social movements, continue to challenge binary categorization such as black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, and notions that essentialize, or treat as innately given, the groupings created within an oppressive social order. The inadequacy of defining the experience of individuals and groups in simplistic binary terms is reflected through challenges within the gay and lesbian movement raised by bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people. The range of experiences of people holding multiple identities and diverse social group memberships poses continuing challenges that theories of oppression account for their experiences.

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4 (CONTINUED)

Conceptual Foundations

Rita Hardiman, Bailey W. Jackson, and Pat Griffin

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CHOICE OF LABELS FOR OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED GROUPS

There are currently many terms that are used to describe oppressed and oppressor groups and the individual members of those groups. Oppressed groups are variously referred to as *targets*, *the targeted*, *victims*, *disadvantaged*, *subordinates*, or *the subordinated*. Oppressor groups are often referred to as *advantaged*, *dominants*, *agents*, and *privileged*. The reasons for choosing one term over another vary depending on a number of theoretical, political, pedagogical, and strategic considerations. Indeed, none of these terms is universally accepted. As educators, we must be careful, however, not to trivialize the effects of oppression by the terms that we use in describing this serious social condition and the roles individual people play in the maintenance of this social system. . . .

OPPRESSION OPERATES ON MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

Oppression is an interlocking, multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups and is maintained and operationalized on three dimensions: (a) contextual dimension, (b) conscious/unconscious dimension, and (c) applied dimension (see Figure 4.1).

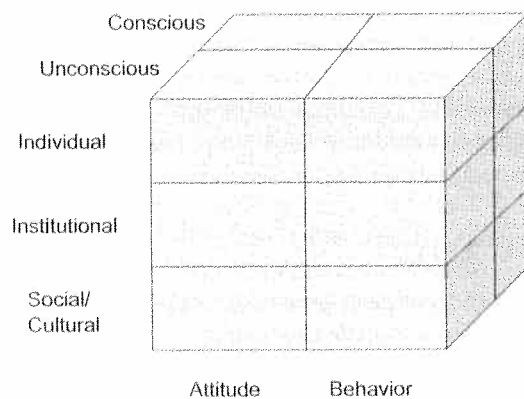


Figure 4.1 Multiple Dimensions of Oppression

The contextual dimension consists of three levels: (a) individual, (b) institutional, and (c) social/cultural. The conscious/unconscious dimension describes how oppression is both intentional and unintentional. The applied dimension describes how oppression is manifested at the individual (attitudes and behaviors), institutional (policies, practices, and norms), and societal/cultural (values, beliefs, and customs) levels. The conscious/unconscious and the applied dimensions will be discussed further within the descriptions of each of the three contextual levels below:

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Oppression is maintained at the individual level by attitudes or behaviors of individual persons. These attitudes and behaviors can be conscious or unconscious, but their effects are equally destructive. Examples of individual actions or attitudes include the belief that women are not as capable of making reasonable, rational decisions as men are (conscious attitude); a male employer making unwanted sexual comments to a female employee in the workplace (conscious behavior); a white person automatically taking extra care to protect personal belongings when in the presence of black or Latino people (unconscious attitude); or a temporarily able-bodied person speaking loudly or slowly and using simple terms when addressing a physically disabled person (unconscious behavior).

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Social institutions such as the family, government, business and industry, education, the legal system, and religious organizations are major participants in a system of oppression. Social institutions codify oppression in laws, policies, practices, and norms. As with behaviors and attitudes at the individual level, institutional policies and practices that maintain and enforce oppression are both intentional and unintentional. Examples of the less visible systems include the structural inequality of school funding in the United States, or tax benefits, health care benefits, and similar privileges that are available only to heterosexual couples through the institution of marriage. Other examples of institutional attitudes include the following: lack of an exit interview policy with faculty persons of color who take positions elsewhere to determine how a university can improve its ability to retain faculty of color in a predominantly white university (unconscious institutional norm), a business that decides not to provide bereavement leave to a lesbian employee whose partner dies (conscious institutional policy), and a state legislature that passes a law barring illegal immigrants from accessing public services (conscious institutional law).

Institutions fail to address discrimination and inequality or fail to see the discriminatory consequences of their policies and practices as often as they intentionally act to support, maintain, or advocate social oppression: for example, failing to enforce existing sexual harassment policies or deciding to hold an organizational social event in an inaccessible space without thinking that this decision might preclude the participation of members with mobility impairments.

SOCIETAL/CULTURAL LEVEL

Society's cultural norms and patterns perpetuate implicit and explicit values that bind institutions and individuals. In an oppressive society, the cultural perspective of dominant groups is imposed on institutions by individuals and on individuals by institutions. These cultural norms include philosophies of life, definitions of good and evil, beauty, normal, health, deviance, sickness, and perspectives on time, just to name a few. Cultural norms often serve the primary function of providing individuals and institutions with the justification for social oppression. Examples of these cultural beliefs or norms that influence the perspective of individual and institutional actions and attitudes include the assumption that the definition of a family is a heterosexual nuclear family (can be either conscious or unconscious norm) and the belief that anyone can achieve economic stability in the United States if they are willing to work hard and take personal responsibility for their own achievements (conscious norm).

WE ARE SOCIALIZED TO ACCEPT SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION AS NORMAL

We are socialized into a system of social oppression through interactions with individuals, institutions, and culture. We learn to accept systems of oppression as normal through interactions with parents, peers, teachers, and other influential individuals in our lives as they, intentionally or unintentionally, pass on to us their beliefs about oppressor and oppressed groups. We also learn to accept oppression as normal through our experiences in schools and religious organizations, and our encounters with health care, criminal justice systems, and other institutions that affect our daily lives. We may not recognize how our embeddedness in particular cultural norms and values affects our views of oppressor and oppressed groups because of the pervasive presence of oppressor ideology. When viewed as a whole, our socialization into acceptance of oppressive systems, through our interactions with individuals, institutions, and cultural norms and values, constitutes a cycle of business as usual until we are able to interrupt it with information or experiences that call into question the truth of what we have learned about the power relationships among different social groups and our own position vis-à-vis these dynamics. At this point, we can choose to interrupt our socialization, to step out of the cycle of socialization with new awareness, information, and action.

THE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION CO-OPTS THE SOCIAL CATEGORIES USED TO DESCRIBE THE DIFFERENCES AMONG AND BETWEEN SOCIAL GROUPS

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We all have memberships in multiple social identity groups. That is to say, we can be described by our sex, race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, class, age, and ability. Naming our social group memberships/differences serves as a means of naming/describing our social/cultural groupings. They are primarily a way to describe our social group differences. . . . Though we experience our social group memberships as material, tangible

identities (for example, woman, Black, heterosexual), we also inherit status associated with these identities in a system of oppression. In this way, oppression co-opts identities by attaching meaning and status to them that support the system of social oppression. The pervasive and systematic nature of oppression normalizes the redefined nature of the differences associated with social identity and transforms them into oppressed and oppressor social group identities at the expense of more neutral or alternative conceptions of identities and status (see Figure 4.2).

Members of oppressed groups are often more acutely aware of their membership because they experience the daily effects of oppression. Members of oppressor groups, on the other hand, are often unaware of themselves as members of a privileged group because the system of oppression enables and encourages them to view the accomplishments and achievements of their group members as deserved, the result of hard work, virtue, or natural superiority. At the same time, members of oppressor groups often blame the struggles, failures, and anger of members of oppressed groups on their inability, deficiency, or refusal to accept things as they are.

We are born into some of our social identities (e.g., race and ethnicity), and others either can be present at birth or can change or be acquired during our lifetime (e.g., age, class, religion, or physical/development ability). For some social group memberships, such as sexual orientation, the debate over whether we are born into or choose our sexual orientation has political consequences for the struggle for gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights. Opponents of gay rights in part base their arguments on the belief that homosexuality and bisexuality are sinful, immoral, and psychologically disturbed behavior choices. Many, but not all, gay rights proponents insist that sexual orientation is not a choice, but a characteristic with which we are born. Similarly, the transgender rights movement has challenged beliefs about the immutability of sex and gender assigned at birth, calling for a more fluid, nonbinary conception of gender and sex.

Most of us have social identities that are disadvantaged by some forms of oppression and privileged by others. Because our membership in oppressor or oppressed groups can change during our lifetime, our relative status in relationship to our multiple identities is not static. For example, a white man who becomes disabled, a Latina with working-class roots who becomes the CEO of a large corporation, or any of us as we grow old and experience changes in our status associated with aging, declining economic status, or disability, experience changes in social status related to group memberships.

Some forms of oppression are closely correlated; thus . . . if one is poor in the United States, whether destitute or among the working poor or chronically unemployed, one is

Examples of Manifestations of Social Oppression	Examples of Oppressor Groups (US-Based)	Examples of Oppressed Groups (US-Based)
Classism	Owning Class, Upper Middle Class, Middle Class	Working Class, Poor
Heterosexism	Heterosexuals	Lesbians, Bisexuals, Gay Men
Ableism	Physical/Developmentally/ Psychologically Able-Bodied People	Physically/Developmentally/ Psychologically Disabled People
Racism	Whites	African American; Asian American; Latina/o; Native American; Multi-Racial People
Religious Oppression	Christians	Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Atheists
Sexism	Men	Women

Figure 4.2. Examples of Multiple Manifestations and Oppressor and Oppressed Groups

more likely to experience illness and impairments that lead to disability due to the lack of access to health care. Similarly, acquiring a disability is closely correlated with being unemployed, being underemployed, or otherwise living on the economic margins of society without adequate access to health care.

The paradigm of “intersectionality,” emerging from the fields of sociology, cultural studies, and critical race theory, informs our understanding of the complexities of how people experience privilege and disadvantage based on their social group memberships. Intersectionality suggests that markers of difference do not act independent of one another. Instead, our various social identities interrelate to negate the possibility of a unitary or universal experience of any one manifestation of oppression. An Asian or Latino gay man experiences the privilege of sexism in different ways than a white European heterosexual man because his experience of male privilege is muted by his identity as a man of color in a racist society and a gay man in a homophobic society.

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The list of possible social identities is necessarily incomplete as our understanding of systems of oppression and liberation continues to evolve. Because the list of categories of social groups and the descriptions and types of social group change and expand over time with the heightening of our social consciousness, it is necessary that we acknowledge the limitations of current conceptualizations. For example, sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual) was not a distinct identity until the late 19th century. Likewise, transgender and intersex identities as well as many emergent associated identities like “genderqueer” have only entered the lexicon of oppression in the last 15 years.

BORDER IDENTITIES

No attempt to describe the complex dynamics of oppression can be completely all-encompassing of lived experience. Some social identities do not clearly fit into a binary model of oppressed/targeted or oppressor/advantaged. We acknowledge this limitation with the designation *border identities*. Examples of border identities include people of mixed racial backgrounds, and persons who are bicultural by virtue of being born or raised in one country or culture and moving to a new country and cultural milieu. Adopted children of one race who are raised by persons of a different race may also occupy bordered space. Some social identities that could at one time be characterized as targeted identities have, over time, migrated to the advantaged side of the binary or at least moved out of the targeted category as oppressors rename and redefine targeted groups for their own benefit. For example, Roman Catholics were historically subjected to discrimination and violence, but are now integrated into the fabric of mainstream religions in the United States with considerable political power.

Some individuals with border identities may experience both privilege and disadvantage due to their status. For instance a bisexual man who is in a heterosexual marriage is both privileged by having access to rights only enjoyed by heterosexuals, and also potentially targeted by his identity as a bisexual in a binary system of sexual orientation. A transgender or transsexual man may intentionally or unintentionally benefit from male privilege after transitioning yet still be discriminated against by health care, criminal justice, or other social institutions because he is transgender. Similarly, children of color who are adopted by white families may have access to both race or class privilege from their parents, but are also targeted by racism due to their appearance and cultural characteristics.

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DISADVANTAGED BY ASSOCIATION

Another group that does not fit within the binary notion of oppressed/advantaged or oppressed/targeted are those who occupy an intermediary or gray space due to their relationship to family members or significant others in their lives. These persons might include parents, spouses/partners, or family members of people with disabilities; parents or siblings of lesbians, gays, bisexual, or transgender people; or white people who are married or partnered to people of color, or have children of color. For example, able-bodied parents of a disabled child may have privilege as nondisabled people, yet their life circumstances are profoundly affected by their relationship to a disabled individual—their child. Their child's targeted status affects the family's income, housing, ability to travel, employment, and social interactions in their community. They may have to deal with the stereotypes or stigma attached to their child or other family member.

Similarly, a white member of a mixed-race couple or a white parent of mixed-race children is affected by racism in a secondary way and has less clear access to systems that advantage Whites in a racist society, due to this relationship. The mixed-race family's ability to find housing, social acceptance, employment, and safety is affected by racism, and this therefore has an impact on the white member of the family as well as the family members who are people of color. People in these situations are "disadvantaged by association" and live a dual existence: having access to privilege and resources in some capacities due to their personal dominant status, but also being a target of discrimination and other manifestations of oppression due to their family status. Individuals who are disadvantaged by association, however, do not automatically become allies. Many individuals in these relationships continue to support or participate in the system of oppression to which their loved one, and indeed they, are subjected by encouraging assimilation or other strategies that collude with oppression.

RELATIONSHIPS AMONG AND BETWEEN OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED GROUPS IN A SYSTEM OF OPPRESSION

INTERNALIZED SUBORDINATION AND DOMINATION

Oppressive systems work most effectively when both advantaged and targeted group members internalize their roles and accept their positions in the hierarchical relationship between them.

Internalized subordination refers to ways in which the oppressed collude with their own oppression. Targeted social groups can live within a system of oppression that injures them or deprives them of certain rights without having the language or consciousness. Freire used the term *conscientization* to name their understanding of their situation as an effect of oppression rather than the natural order of things. Memmi described this process as *psychological colonization* when disadvantaged groups internalize their oppressed condition and collude with the oppressive ideology and social system. Freire refers to this process as oppressed groups playing host to the oppressor.

People who have been socialized in an oppressive environment, and who internalize the dominant group's ideology about their group, have learned to accept a definition of themselves that is hurtful and limiting. They think, feel, and act in ways that demonstrate

the devaluation of their group and accept themselves as members of an inferior group. For example, internalized subordination is operating when oppressed group members question the credentials or abilities of members of their own social group without cause, yet unquestioningly accept that members of the oppressor group are qualified, talented, and deserving of their credentials. Internalized subordination also operates when target group members curry favor with dominant group members and distance themselves from their own group.

Conscious collusion occurs when oppressed group members knowingly, but not necessarily voluntarily, go along with their own mistreatment to survive or to maintain some status, livelihood, or other benefit, as when a person of color silently endures racist jokes told by a boss. Such collusion is often seen by the targeted group member as necessary to “live to fight another day.” The more insidious form of collusion is unconscious, not knowing that one is collaborating with one’s own dehumanization: for example, when a woman blames herself for the actions of her rapist or batterer or when gay and lesbian people, in order to gain acceptance from heterosexuals, exclude members of their community who look or act “too gay.”

Internalized domination refers to the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of oppressor group members who, through their socialization as members of the dominant group, learn to think and act in ways that express internalized notions of entitlement and privilege. Members of oppressor groups are socialized to internalize their dominant status so that it is not seen as privileged, but is experienced as the natural order of things, as rights, rather than as a consequence of systems that provide them with advantages not readily available to other groups.

Examples of internalized domination include men talking over and interrupting women in conversation, while simultaneously labeling women as chatty. Privileged groups learn to expect to be treated well and to be accommodated, as when English-only-speaking people in the United States get irritated when English language learners speak English with an accent. Extreme examples include the “erasure” of targeted group members by failing to acknowledge their existence or importance. For example, historical presentations that Columbus discovered America erase the existence of native peoples who preceded him by several thousand years.

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INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Now that we have described the characteristics of social oppression and the dynamics that serve to maintain oppressive systems, we turn our attention to an equally important topic in our courses: fostering individual and social change. . . . To be able to envision oneself as a change agent, it is necessary to have language that describes this role. We use the terms *ally* for advantaged group members and *empowered targeted group members* to refer to these change agent roles.

ALLIES

Allies are members of the advantaged group who act against the oppression(s) from which they derive power, privilege, and acceptance. Individuals who choose to ally themselves with people who are targeted by oppression may have different motivations for their actions. Some allies may be motivated by an understanding that their privileges come at

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a cost, and working against oppression can be in one's self-interest. For example, understanding how eliminating architectural barriers that limit people with disabilities' access to buildings can also benefit temporarily able-bodied people as they themselves age or become disabled. Other allies may be motivated to act by altruistic feelings or by a moral or spiritual belief that oppression is wrong. Another source of motivation may come from one's experience as a person who is "disadvantaged by association" with people who are targeted. For example, having a child who is disabled or having a family member "come out" as lesbian or gay can spur family members to become allies against the oppression that is targeting their loved ones, and themselves by extension. Whatever the motivation for allies, their role as change agents, working with other privileged group members or in coalition with targeted group members to challenge systems of oppression, is an essential aspect of eliminating inequality.

EMPOWERED TARGETED GROUP MEMBERS

Empowered targeted group members reject the inferior status assigned to them in a system of oppression. They work to overcome the internalized aspects of oppression they were socialized to accept. They have pride in their group identity and enjoy a sense of community with others from their social identity group. Feminist consciousness-raising groups and gay pride marches are two examples of these efforts. Most importantly, they develop a liberatory consciousness that leads them to become actively involved in efforts to eliminate oppression. These efforts include working in coalition with allies or working with other targeted group members. Finally, empowered targeted group members understand the interconnections among different manifestations of oppression and the importance of challenging them all, not only the ones that affect them most directly.

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UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

Several underlying assumptions create a philosophical foundation for our social justice education practice.

IT IS NOT USEFUL TO ARGUE ABOUT A HIERARCHY OF OPPRESSIONS

We believe that little is gained in debating which forms of oppression are more damaging or which one is the root out of which all others grow. Though we acknowledge that some participants believe that there is an urgent need to address one form of oppression over others, we present the perspective that each form of oppression is destructive to the human spirit. We do, however, identify ways in which specific forms of oppression are similar or different, but do not rank the differences identified. Our courses are based on the belief that even if we could eliminate one form of oppression, the continued existence of the others would still affect us all.

ALL FORMS OF OPPRESSION ARE INTERCONNECTED

In addition to our use of an underlying conceptual framework to understand the dynamics of all the forms of oppression, we also recognize that each participant in our courses is a

collage of many social identities. Even though a course is focused on sexism, for example, each participant's race, class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and gender affect how that participant experiences sexism. We encourage participants to explore the intersections of their different social group memberships and also to understand the similarities in the dynamics of different forms of oppression.

CONFRONTING OPPRESSION WILL BENEFIT EVERYONE

Most people can understand how confronting sexism will benefit women or how addressing ableism will benefit people with disabilities. We also believe that men and nondisabled people will benefit from the elimination of sexism and ableism. Unfortunately, some participants react to social justice education as if engaged in a conflict in which one group wins and another loses. However, when people are subjected to oppression whatever their social group membership, their talents and potential achievements are lost and we all suffer from this loss. Moreover, we all have spheres of influence and connections that link us to people who are directly affected by oppression. Even if we are not members of a particular disadvantaged social group, we have friends, coworkers, or family members who are. In addition, we might become members of disadvantaged social groups in the future if, for example, we become disabled or have a change in economic circumstances. Another way we are hurt by oppression is that many people who are members of groups that benefit from oppression live with a burden of guilt, shame, and helplessness and are never sure whether their individual accomplishments are earned or the result of advantages received due to their social group membership. Confronting oppression can free members of all social groups to take action toward social justice. The goal in eliminating oppression is an equitable redistribution of social power and resources among all social groups at all levels (individual, institutional, and societal/cultural). The goal is not to reverse the current power inequity by simply interchanging the groups in power positions.

FIXING BLAME HELPS NO ONE; TAKING RESPONSIBILITY HELPS EVERYONE

We present the perspective that there is little to be gained from fixing blame for our heritage of social injustice. We are each born into a social system in which we are taught to accept things as they are. Nothing is gained by feeling shame about what our ancestors did or what our contemporaries do to different groups of people out of fear, ignorance, or malice. Taking responsibility, in contrast, means acting to address oppression. Rather than becoming lost in a sense of helplessness, our goal is to enable participants to understand how they can choose to take responsibility in their everyday lives for confronting social injustice.

CONFRONTING SOCIAL INJUSTICE IS PAINFUL AND JOYFUL

Most participants do not want to believe that they harbor prejudices about groups of people. Confronting these prejudices in themselves and others is difficult. Participants need to open themselves to the discomfort and uncertainty of questioning what is familiar, comfortable, and unquestioned. Facing the contradictions between what participants have been taught to believe about social justice and the realities of the experiences of different social groups is complex. Participants learn that some of what they were taught is inaccurate. Some necessary information was not part of their education. Participants need to be assisted through this process with hope and care. At the same time, we believe that understanding social oppression and taking action against it can be a joyful and liberating experience. Some participants' lives are changed in exciting and life-affirming ways as a

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result of their experiences in social justice education courses. They find ways to act on their beliefs and make changes in their personal lives that profoundly affect their personal and professional relationships.

5

Five Faces of Oppression

Iris Marion Young

... In this chapter I offer some explanation of the concept of oppression as I understand its use by new social movements in the United States since the 1960s. My starting point is reflection on the conditions of the groups said by these movements to be oppressed: among others, women, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Spanish-speaking Americans, American Indians, Jews, lesbians and gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-class people, and the physically and mentally disabled. I aim to systematize the meaning of the concept of oppression as used by these diverse political movements, and to provide normative argument to clarify the wrongs the term names.

Obviously the above-named groups are not oppressed to the same extent or in the same ways. In the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. In that abstract sense all oppressed people face a common condition. Beyond that, in any more specific sense, it is not possible to define a single set of criteria that describe the condition of oppression of the above groups. Consequently, attempts by theorists and activists to discover a common description or the essential causes of the oppression of all these groups have frequently led to fruitless disputes about whose oppression is more fundamental or more grave. The contexts in which members of these groups use the term *oppression* to describe the injustices of their situation suggest that oppression names in fact a family of concepts and conditions, which I divide into five categories: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

OPPRESSION AS A STRUCTURAL CONCEPT

... In its traditional usage, oppression means the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group. Oppression also traditionally carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination. The Hebrews were oppressed in Egypt, and many uses of the term oppression in the West invoke this paradigm. . . . New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept of oppression. In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. . . .

... Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. ... In this extended structural sense, oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. ...

I do not mean to suggest that within a system of oppression individual persons do not intentionally harm others in oppressed groups. The raped woman, the beaten Black youth, the locked-out worker, the gay man harassed on the street, are victims of intentional actions by identifiable agents. I also do not mean to deny that specific groups are beneficiaries of the oppression of other groups, and thus have an interest in their continued oppression. Indeed, for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged in relation to that group. ...

Racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, some social movements asserted, are distinct forms of oppression with their own dynamics apart from those of class, even though they may interact with class oppression. From often heated discussions among socialists, feminists, and antiracism activists in the last ten years, a consensus is emerging that many different groups must be said to be oppressed in our society, and that no single form of oppression can be assigned causal or moral primacy. The same discussion has also led to the recognition that group differences cut across individual lines in a multiplicity of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects. Only a plural explication of the concept of oppression can adequately capture these insights.

Accordingly, I offer below an explication of five faces of oppression as a useful set of categories and distinctions which I believe is comprehensive in the sense that it covers all the groups said by new left social movements to be oppressed, and all the ways they are oppressed. I derive the five faces of oppression from reflection on the condition of these groups. Because different factors, or combinations of factors, constitute the oppression of different groups, making their oppression irreducible, I believe it is not possible to give one essential definition of oppression. The five categories articulated in this chapter, however, are adequate to describe the oppression of any group, as well as its similarities with and differences from the oppression of other groups. But first we must ask what a "group" is.

THE CONCEPT OF A SOCIAL GROUP

... A social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience (or way of life), which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group. Groups are an expression of social relations; a group exists only in relation to at least one other group. ...

A social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity. What defines Black Americans as a social group is not primarily their skin color; some persons whose skin color is fairly light, for example, identify themselves as black. Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces, and self-identification that define the group as a group. ...

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Groups constitute individuals. A person's particular sense of history, affinity, and separateness—even the person's mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling—are constituted partly by her or his group affinities. This does not mean that persons have no individual styles, or are unable to transcend or reject a group identity. Nor does it preclude persons from having many aspects that are independent of these group identities. . . .

While I agree that individuals should be free to pursue life plans in their own ways, it is foolish to deny the reality of groups. . . . Even when they belong to oppressed groups, people's group identifications are often important to them, and they often feel a special affinity for others in their group. I believe that group differentiation is both an inevitable and a desirable aspect of modern social processes. Social justice requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression.

...

THE FACES OF OPPRESSION

EXPLOITATION

The central insight expressed in the concept of exploitation is that this oppression occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another. The injustice of class division does not consist only in the distributive fact that some people have great wealth while most people have little. Exploitation enacts a structural relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social processes by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality. These relations are produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves. . . .

Feminists have had little difficulty showing that women's oppression consists partly in a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of powers from women to men. Women's oppression consists not merely in an inequality of status, power, and wealth resulting from men's excluding them from privileged activities. The freedom, power, status, and self-realization of men is possible precisely because women work for them. Gender exploitation has two aspects: transfer of the fruits of material labor to men, and the transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men. . . . Thus, for example, in most systems of agriculture production in the world, men take to market the goods women have produced, and more often than not men receive the status and often the entire income from this labor.

... Women provide men and children with emotional care and provide men with sexual satisfaction, and as a group receive relatively little of either from men. The gender socialization of women makes us tend to be more attentive to interactive dynamics than men, and makes women good at providing empathy and support for people's feelings and at smoothing over interactive tensions. Both men and women look to women as nurturers of their personal lives, and women frequently complain that when they look to men for emotional support they do not receive it. The norms of heterosexuality, moreover, are oriented around male pleasure, and consequently, many women receive little satisfaction from their sexual interactions with men.

...

Is it possible to conceptualize a form of exploitation that is racially specific on analogy with the gender-specific forms just discussed? I suggest that the category of *menial* labor

might supply a means for such conceptualization. In its derivation, "menial" designates the labor of servants. Wherever there is racism, there is the assumption, more or less enforced, that members of the oppressed racial groups are or ought to be servants of those, or some of those, in the privileged group. In most white racist societies this means that many white people have dark- or yellow-skinned domestic servants, and in the United States today there remains significant racial structuring of private household service. But in the United States today much service labor has gone public: anyone who goes to a good hotel or a good restaurant can have servants. Servants often attend the daily—and nightly—activities of business executives, government officials, and other high-status professionals. In our society there remains strong cultural pressure to fill servant jobs—bellhop, porter, chambermaid, busboy, and so on—with Black and Latino workers. These jobs entail a transfer of energies whereby the servers enhance the status of the served.

Menial labor usually refers not only to service, however, but also to any servile, unskilled, low-paying work lacking in autonomy, in which a person is subject to taking orders from many people. Menial work tends to be auxiliary work, instrumental to the work of others, where those others receive primary recognition for doing the job. Laborers on a construction site, for example, are at the beck and call of welders, electricians, carpenters, and other skilled workers, who receive recognition for the job done. In the United States explicit racial discrimination once reserved menial work for Blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, and Chinese, and menial work still tends to be linked to Black and Latino workers. I offer this category of menial labor as a form of racially specific exploitation, as a provisional category in need of exploration. . . .

The injustice of exploitation consists in social processes that bring about a transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and in the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more. The injustices of exploitation cannot be eliminated by the redistribution of goods, for as long as institutionalized practices and structural relations remain unaltered, the process of transfer will re-create an unequal distribution of benefits. Bringing about justice where there is exploitation requires reorganization of institutions and practices of decision making, alteration of the division of labor, and similar measures of institutional, structural, and cultural change.

MARGINALIZATION

Increasingly in the United States, racial oppression occurs in the form of marginalization rather than exploitation. *Marginals* are people the system of labor cannot or will not use. Not only in Third World capitalist countries, but also in most Western capitalist societies, there is a growing underclass of people permanently confined to lives of social marginality, most of whom are racially marked—Blacks or Indians in Latin America, and Blacks, East Indians, Eastern Europeans, or North Africans in Europe.

Marginalization is by no means the fate only of racially marked groups, however. In the United States a shamefully large proportion of the population is marginal: old people, and increasingly people who are not very old but get laid off from their jobs and cannot find new work; young people, especially Black or Latino, who cannot find first or second jobs; many single mothers and their children; other people involuntarily unemployed; many mentally and physically disabled people; American Indians (especially those on reservations).

Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination. The material deprivation marginalization often causes is certainly unjust, especially in a society where others have plenty.

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Contemporary advanced capitalist societies have in principle acknowledged the injustice of material deprivation caused by marginalization, and have taken some steps to address it by providing welfare payments and services. The continuance of this welfare state is by no means assured, and in most welfare state societies, especially the United States, welfare redistributions do not eliminate large-scale suffering and deprivation.

Material deprivation, which can be addressed by redistributive social policies, is not, however, the extent of the harm caused by marginalization. Two categories of injustice beyond distribution are associated with marginality in advanced capitalist societies. First, the provision of welfare itself produces new injustice by depriving those dependent on it of rights and freedoms that others have. Second, even when material deprivation is somewhat mitigated by the welfare state, marginalization is unjust because it blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways. I shall explicate each of these in turn.

...

Today the exclusion of dependent persons from equal citizenship rights is only barely hidden beneath the surface. Because they depend on bureaucratic institutions for support or services, the old, the poor, and the mentally or physically disabled are subject to patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment by the policies and people associated with welfare bureaucracies. Being a "dependent" in our society implies being legitimately subject to the often arbitrary and invasive authority of social service providers and other public and private administrators who enforce rules with which the marginal must comply, and otherwise exercise power over the conditions of their lives. In meeting the needs of the marginalized, often with the aid of social scientific disciplines, welfare agencies also construct the needs themselves. Medical and social service professionals know what is good for those they serve, and the marginals and dependents themselves do not have the right to claim to know what is good for them. Dependency in our society thus implies, as it has in all liberal societies, a sufficient warrant to suspend basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice.

Although dependency produces conditions of injustice in our society, dependency in itself need not be oppressive. One cannot imagine a society in which some people would not need to be dependent on others at least some of the time: children, sick people, women recovering from childbirth, old people who have become frail, depressed or otherwise emotionally needy persons have the moral right to depend on others for subsistence and support.

An important contribution of feminist moral theory has been to question the deeply held assumption that moral agency and full citizenship require that a person be autonomous and independent. Feminists have exposed this assumption as inappropriately individualistic and derived from a specifically male experience of social relations, which values competition and solitary achievement. Female experience of social relations, arising both from women's typical domestic care responsibilities and from the kinds of paid work that many women do, tends to recognize dependence as a basic human condition. Whereas on the autonomy model a just society would, as much as possible, give people the opportunity to be independent, the feminist model envisions justice as according respect and participation in decision making to those who are dependent as well as to those who are independent. Dependency should not be a reason to be deprived of choice and respect, and much of the oppression many marginals experience would be lessened if a less individualistic model of rights prevailed.

Marginalization does not cease to be oppressive when one has shelter and food. Many old people, for example, have sufficient means to live comfortably but remain oppressed in their marginal status. Even if marginals were provided a comfortable material life within institutions that respected their freedom and dignity, injustices of marginality would

remain in the form of uselessness, boredom, and lack of self-respect. Most of our society's productive and recognized activities take place in contexts of organized social cooperation, and social structures and processes that close persons out of such social cooperation are unjust. . . .

POWERLESSNESS

As I have indicated, the Marxist idea of class is important because it helps reveal the structure of exploitation: that some people have their power and wealth because they profit from the labor of others. For this reason I reject the claim some make that a traditional class exploitation model fails to capture the structure of contemporary society. It remains the case that the labor of most people in the society augments the power of relatively few. Despite their differences from nonprofessional workers, most professional workers are still not members of the capitalist class. Professional labor either involves exploitative transfers to capitalists or supplies important conditions for such transfers. Professional workers are in an ambiguous class position, it is true, because they also benefit from the exploitation of nonprofessional workers.

While it is false to claim that a division between capitalist and working classes no longer describes our society, it is also false to say that class relations have remained unaltered since the nineteenth century. An adequate conception of oppression cannot ignore the experience of social division reflected in the colloquial distinction between the "middle class" and the "working class," a division structured by the social division of labor between professionals and nonprofessionals. Professionals are privileged in relation to nonprofessionals by virtue of their position in the division of labor and the status it carries. Nonprofessionals suffer a form of oppression in addition to exploitation, which I call *powerlessness*.

. . . [D]omination in modern society is enacted through the widely dispersed powers of many agents mediating the decisions of others. To that extent many people have some power in relation to others, even though they lack the power to decide policies or results. The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. Powerlessness also designates a position in the division of labor and the concomitant social position that allows persons little opportunity to develop and exercise skills. The powerless have little or no work autonomy; exercise little creativity or judgment in their work; have no technical expertise or authority; express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings; and do not command respect. Powerlessness names the oppressive situations Sennett and Cobb describe in their famous study of working-class men.

This powerless status is perhaps best described negatively: the powerless lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have. The status privilege of professionals has three aspects, the lack of which produces oppression for nonprofessionals.

First, acquiring and practicing a profession has an expansive, progressive character. Being professional usually requires a college education and the acquisition of a specialized knowledge that entails working with symbols and concepts. Professionals experience progress first in acquiring the expertise, and then in the course of professional advancement and rise in status. The life of the nonprofessional by comparison is powerless in the sense that it lacks this orientation toward the progressive development of capacities and avenues for recognition.

Second, while many professionals have supervisors and cannot directly influence many decisions or the actions of many people, most nevertheless have considerable day-to-day work autonomy. Professionals usually have some authority over others, moreover—either over workers they supervise, or over auxiliaries or clients. Nonprofessionals, on the other

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hand, lack autonomy, and in both their working and their consumer/client lives often stand under the authority of professionals.

Though based on a division of labor between "mental" and "manual" work, the distinction between "middle class" and "working class" designates a division not only in working life, but also in nearly all aspects of social life. Professionals and nonprofessionals belong to different cultures in the United States. The two groups tend to live in segregated neighborhoods or even different towns, a process itself mediated by planners, zoning officials, and real estate people. The groups tend to have different tastes in food, decor, clothes, music, and vacations, and often different health and educational needs. Members of each group socialize for the most part with others in the same status group. While there is some intergroup mobility between generations, for the most part the children of professionals become professionals and the children of nonprofessionals do not.

Thus, the privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to a whole way of life. I call this way of life *respectability*. To treat people with respect is to be prepared to listen to what they have to say or to do what they request because they have some authority, expertise, or influence. The norms of respectability in our society are associated specifically with professional culture. Professional dress, speech, tastes, demeanor all connote respectability. Generally professionals expect and receive respect from others. In restaurants, banks, hotels, real estate offices, and many other such public places, as well as in the media, professionals typically receive more respectful treatment than nonprofessionals. For this reason nonprofessionals seeking a loan or a job, or to buy a house or a car, will often try to look "professional" and "respectable" in those settings.

The privilege of this professional respectability appears starkly in the dynamics of racism and sexism. In daily interchange, women and men of color must prove their respectability. At first they are often not treated by strangers with respectful distance or deference. Once people discover that this woman or that Puerto Rican man is a college teacher or a business executive, however, they often behave more respectfully toward her or him. . . .

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness all refer to relations of power and oppression that occur by virtue of the social division of labor—who works for whom, who does not work, and how the content of work defines one institutional position relative to others. These three categories refer to structural and institutional relations that delimit people's material lives, including but not restricted to the resources they have access to and the concrete opportunities they have or do not have to develop and exercise their capacities. These kinds of oppression are a matter of concrete power in relation to others—of who benefits from whom, and who is dispensable.

Recent theorists of movements of group liberation, notably feminist and Black liberation theorists, have also given prominence to a rather different form of oppression, which following Lugones and Spelman I shall call *cultural imperialism*. To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it as the Other.

Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. . . . Often without noticing they do so, dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such. Cultural products also express the dominant group's perspective on and interpretation of events and elements in the society, including other groups in the society, insofar as they attain cultural status at all.

An encounter with other groups, however, can challenge the dominant group's claim to universality. The dominant group reinforces its position by bringing the other groups under the measure of its dominant norms. Consequently, the difference of women from men, American Indians or Africans from Europeans, Jews from Christians, homosexuals from heterosexuals, workers from professionals becomes reconstructed largely as deviance and inferiority. Since only the dominant group's cultural expressions receive wide dissemination, their cultural expressions become the normal, or the universal, and thereby the unremarkable. Given the normality of its own cultural expressions and identity, the dominant group constructs the differences which some groups exhibit as lack and negation. These groups become marked as Other.

The culturally dominated undergo a paradoxical oppression in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible. As remarkable, deviant beings, the culturally imperialized are stamped with an essence. The stereotypes confine them to a nature which is often attached in some way to their bodies, and which thus cannot easily be denied. These stereotypes so permeate the society that they are not noticed as contestable. Just as everyone knows that the earth goes around the sun, so everyone knows that gay people are promiscuous, that American Indians are alcoholics, and that women are good with children. White males, on the other hand, insofar as they escape group marking, can be individuals.

Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them. Consequently, the dominant culture's stereotyped and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to the behavior of others influenced by those images. This creates for the culturally oppressed the experience that W. E. B. Du Bois called "double consciousness"—"this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human—capable of activity, full of hope and possibility—she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior.

The group defined by the dominant culture as deviant, as a stereotyped Other, is culturally different from the dominant group, because the status of Otherness creates specific experiences not shared by the dominant group, and because culturally oppressed groups also are often socially segregated and occupy specific positions in the social division of labor. Members of such groups express their specific group experiences and interpretations of the world to one another, developing and perpetuating their own culture. Double consciousness, then, occurs because one finds one's being defined by two cultures: a dominant and a subordinate culture. Because they can affirm and recognize one another as sharing similar experiences and perspectives on social life, people in culturally imperialized groups can often maintain a sense of positive subjectivity.

Cultural imperialism involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different. The invisibility comes about when dominant groups fail to recognize the perspective embodied in their cultural expressions as a perspective. These dominant cultural expressions often simply have little place for the experience of other groups, at most only mentioning or referring to them in stereotyped or marginalized ways. This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group's own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life. . . .

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VIOLENCE

Finally, many groups suffer the oppression of systematic violence. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. In American society women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threats of violence, and in at least some regions Jews, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Spanish-speaking Americans must fear such violence as well. Physical violence against these groups is shockingly frequent. Rape crisis center networks estimate that more than one-third of all American women experience an attempted or successful sexual assault in their lifetimes. Manning Marable catalogs a large number of incidents of racist violence and terror against Blacks in the United States between 1980 and 1982. He cites dozens of incidents of the severe beating, killing, or rape of Blacks by police officers on duty, in which the police involved were acquitted of any wrongdoing. In 1981, moreover, there were at least five hundred documented cases of random white teenage violence against Blacks. Violence against gay men and lesbians is not only common, but has been increasing in the last five years. While the frequency of physical attack on members of these and other racially or sexually marked groups is very disturbing, I also include in this category less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members.

...
What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves—though these are often utterly horrible—than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systemic character, its existence as a social practice.

Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group. Any woman, for example, has a reason to fear rape. Regardless of what a Black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality or powerlessness, he lives knowing he is subject to attack or harassment. The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy.

Violence is a social practice. It is a social given that everyone knows happens and will happen again. It is always at the horizon of social imagination, even for those who do not perpetrate it. According to the prevailing social logic, some circumstances make such violence more “called for” than others. The idea of rape will occur to many men who pick up a hitch-hiking woman; the idea of hounding or teasing a gay man on their dorm floor will occur to many straight male college students. Often several persons inflict the violence together, especially in all-male groupings. Sometimes violators set out looking for people to beat up, rape, or taunt. This rule-bound, social, and often premeditated character makes violence against groups a social practice.

Group violence approaches legitimacy, moreover, in the sense that it is tolerated. Often, third parties find it unsurprising because it happens frequently and lies as a constant possibility at the horizon of the social imagination. Even when they are caught, those who perpetrate acts of group-directed violence or harassment often receive light or no punishment. To that extent society renders their acts acceptable.

...
[T]he violation of rape, beating, killing, and harassment of women, people of color, gays, and other marked groups is motivated by fear or hatred of those groups. Sometimes

the motive may be a simple will to power, to victimize those marked as vulnerable by the very social fact that they are subject to violence. If so, this motive is secondary in the sense that it depends on a social practice of group violence. Violence-causing fear or hatred of the other at least partly involves insecurities on the part of the violators; its irrationality suggests that unconscious processes are at work.

Cultural imperialism, moreover, itself intersects with violence. The culturally imperialized may reject the dominant meanings and attempt to assert their own subjectivity, or the fact of the cultural difference may put the lie to the dominant culture's implicit claim to universality. The dissonance generated by such a challenge to the hegemonic cultural meanings can also be a source of irrational violence.

... I have argued that group-directed violence is institutionalized and systemic. To the degree that institutions and social practices encourage, tolerate, or enable the perpetration of violence against members of specific groups, those institutions and practices are unjust and should be reformed. Such reform may require the redistribution of resources or positions, but in large part can come only through a change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life.

APPLYING THE CRITERIA

... I have arrived at the five faces of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—as the best way to avoid such exclusions and reductions. They function as criteria for determining whether individuals and groups are oppressed, rather than as a full theory of oppression. I believe that these criteria are objective. They provide a means of refuting some people's beliefs that their group is oppressed when it is not, as well as a means of persuading others that a group is oppressed when they doubt it. Each criterion can be operationalized; each can be applied through the assessment of observable behavior, status relationships, distributions, texts, and other cultural artifacts. I have no illusions that such assessments can be value-neutral. But these criteria can nevertheless serve as means of evaluating claims that a group is oppressed, or adjudicating disputes about whether or how a group is oppressed.

The presence of any of these five conditions is sufficient for calling a group oppressed. But different group oppressions exhibit different combinations of these forms, as do different individuals in the groups. Nearly all, if not all, groups said by contemporary social movements to be oppressed suffer cultural imperialism. The other oppressions they experience vary. Working-class people are exploited and powerless, for example, but if employed and white do not experience marginalization and violence. Gay men, on the other hand, are not *qua* gay exploited or powerless, but they experience severe cultural imperialism and violence. Similarly, Jews and Arabs as groups are victims of cultural imperialism and violence, though many members of these groups also suffer exploitation or powerlessness. Old people are oppressed by marginalization and cultural imperialism, and this is also true of physically and mentally disabled people. As a group, women are subject to gender-based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Racism in the United States condemns many Blacks, and Latinos to marginalization, and puts many more at risk, even though many members of these groups escape that condition; members of these groups often suffer all five forms of oppression.

Applying these five criteria to the situation of groups makes it possible to compare the oppressions without reducing them to a common essence or claiming that one is

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more fundamental than another. One can compare the ways in which a particular form of oppression appears in different groups. For example, while the operations of cultural imperialism are often experienced in similar fashion by different groups, there are also important differences. One can compare the combinations of oppressions groups experience, or the intensity of those oppressions. . . .

6

The Cycle of Socialization

Bobbie Harro

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Often, when people begin to study the phenomenon of oppression, they start with recognizing that human beings are different from each other in many ways based upon gender, ethnicity, skin color, first language, age, ability status, religion, sexual orientation, and economic class. The obvious first leap that people make is the assumption that if we just began to *appreciate differences*, and *treat each other with respect*, then everything would be all right, and there would be no oppression. This view is represented beautifully by the now famous quote from Rodney King in response to the riots following his beating and the release of the police officers who were filmed beating him: "Why can't we all just get along?" It should be that simple, but it isn't.

Instead, we are each born into a specific set of *social identities*, related to the categories of difference mentioned above, and these social identities predispose us to unequal *roles* in the dynamic system of oppression. We are then socialized by powerful sources in our worlds to play the roles prescribed by an inequitable social system. This socialization process is *pervasive* (coming from all sides and sources), *consistent* (patterned and predictable), *circular* (self-supporting), *self-perpetuating* (intradependent) and often *invisible* (unconscious and unnamed). All of these characteristics will be clarified in the description of the *cycle of socialization* that follows.

In struggling to understand what roles we have been socialized to play, how we are affected by issues of oppression in our lives, and how we participate in maintaining them, we must begin by making an inventory of our own social identities with relationship to each issue of oppression. An excellent first learning activity is to make a personal inventory of our various social identities relating to the categories listed above—gender, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, economic class, and ability/disability status. The results of this inventory make up the mosaic of social identities (our *social identity profile*) that shape(s) our socialization.

We get systematic training in "how to be" each of our social identities throughout our lives. The cycle of socialization that follows is one way of representing how the socialization process happens, from what sources it comes, how it affects our lives, and how it perpetuates itself. The "Directions for Change" that conclude this chapter suggest ways for interrupting the cycle of socialization and taking charge of our own lives. For purposes of learning, it is often useful to choose only *one* of our social identities, and trace it through

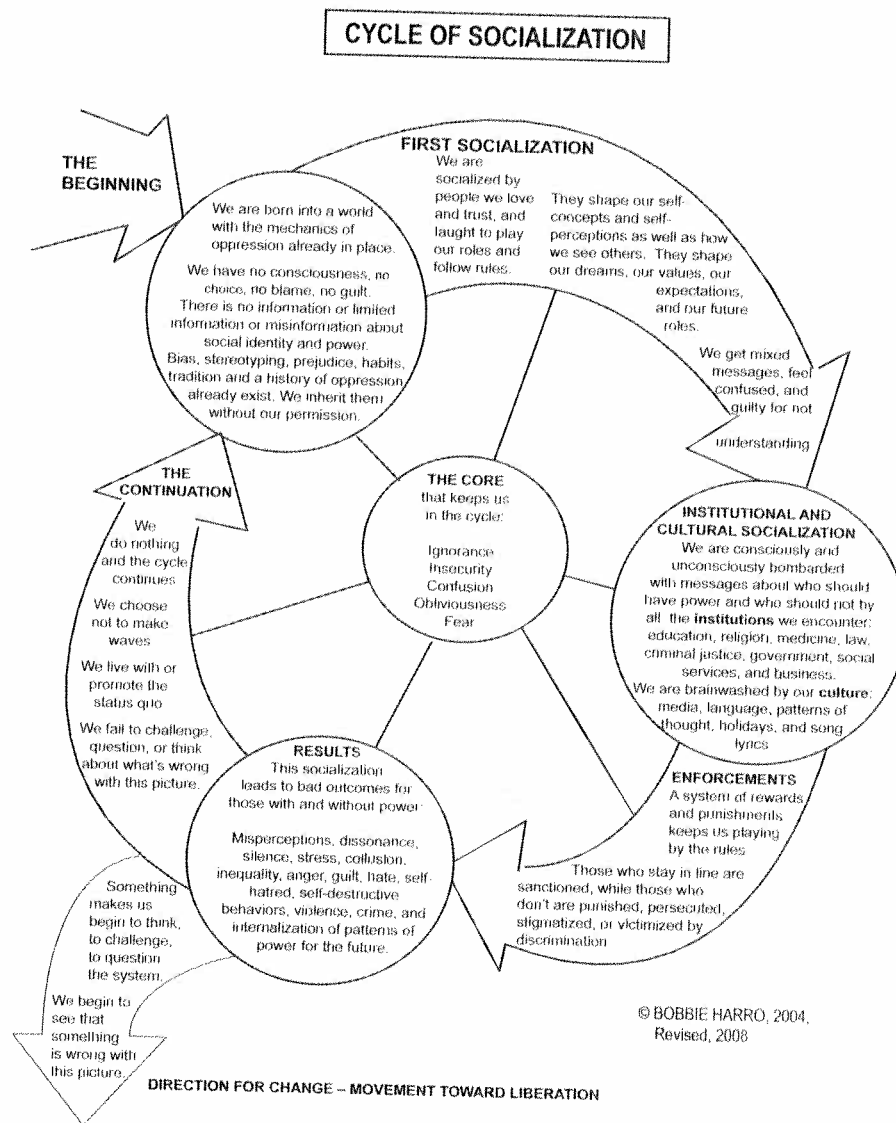


Figure 6.1 The Cycle of Socialization

the cycle of socialization, since it can be quite overwhelming to explore seven identities at once.

THE BEGINNING (CIRCLE NO. 1)

Our socialization begins before we are born, with no choice on our part. No one brings us a survey, in the womb, inquiring into which gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, cultural group, ability status, or age we might want to be born. These identities are ascribed to us at birth through no effort or decision or choice of our own; there is, therefore, no reason to blame each other or hold each other responsible for the identities we have. This first step in the socialization process is outside our control. In addition to having no choice, we also have no initial consciousness about who we are. We don't question our identities at this point. We just *are* who we are.

On top of these givens, we are born into a world where all of the mechanics, assumptions, rules, roles, and structures of oppression are already in place and functioning; we have had nothing to do with constructing them. There is no reason for any of us to feel guilty or responsible for the world into which we are born. We are innocents, falling into an already established system.

The characteristics of this system were built long before we existed, based upon history, habit, tradition, patterns of belief, prejudices, stereotypes, and myths. *Dominant* or *agent* groups are considered the "norm" around which assumptions are built, and these groups receive attention and recognition. Agents have relatively more social power, and can "name" others. They are privileged at birth, and ascribed access to options and opportunities, often without realizing it. We are "lucky" to be born into these groups and rarely question it. Agent groups include men, white people, middle- and upper-class people, abled people, middle-aged people, heterosexuals, and gentiles.

On the other hand, there are many social identity groups about which little or nothing is known because they have not been considered important enough to study. These are referred to as *subordinate* groups or *target* groups. Some target groups are virtually invisible while others are defined by misinformation or very limited information. Targets are disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized by prejudice, discrimination, and other structural obstacles. Target groups include women; racially oppressed groups; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people; disabled people; Jews; elders; youth; and people living in poverty. We are "unlucky" to be born into target groups and therefore devalued by the existing society. Both groups are dehumanized by being socialized into prescribed roles without consciousness or permission.

FIRST SOCIALIZATION (ARROW NO. 1)

Immediately upon our births we begin to be socialized by the people we love and trust the most, our families or the adults who are raising us. They shape our self-concepts and self-perceptions, the norms and rules we must follow, the roles we are taught to play, our expectations for the future, and our dreams. These people serve as role models for us, and they teach us how to behave. This socialization happens both intrapersonally (how we think about ourselves), and interpersonally (how we relate to others). We are told things like, "Boys don't cry"; "You shouldn't trust white people"; "They're better than we are. Stay in your place"; "Don't worry if you break the toy. We can always buy another one"; "Christianity is the true religion"; "Children should be seen and not heard"; "Don't tell anyone that your aunt is mentally retarded. It's embarrassing"; and "Don't kiss other girls. You're supposed to like boys." These messages are an automatic part of our early socialization, and we don't initially question them. We are too dependent on our parents or those raising us, and we haven't yet developed the ability to think for ourselves, so we unconsciously conform to their views.

It is important to observe that they, too, are not to be blamed. They are doing the best they can to raise us, and they only have their own backgrounds from which to draw. They may not have thought critically about what they are teaching us, and may be unconsciously passing on what was taught to them. Some of us may have been raised by parents who *have* thought critically about the messages that they are giving us, but they are still not in the majority. This could be good or bad, as well, depending on what their views are. A consciously racist parent may intentionally pass on racist beliefs to his children, and a consciously feminist parent may intentionally pass on non-stereotypical roles to her children, so it can go either way.

Regardless of the content of the teaching, we have been exposed, without initial question, to a strong set of rules, roles, and assumptions that cannot help but shape our sense

of ourselves and the world. They influence what we take with us when we venture out of our protected family units into the larger world of other institutions.

A powerful way to check out the accuracy of these assertions is to choose one of our social identities and write down at least ten examples of what we learned about being that identity. It's helpful to consider whether we chose an agent or a target identity. We may find that we have thought more about our target identities, and therefore they are easier to inventory. Gender rules are sometimes the easiest, so we might start there. We might also consider doing it for an agent group identity, like males, white people, heterosexuals, gentiles, adults, middle-class people, able-bodied or able-minded people. Most likely, we will find it easier to list learnings for targeted groups than for agent groups.

INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL SOCIALIZATION (CIRCLE NO. 2)

Once we begin to attend school, go to a place of worship, visit a medical facility, play on a sports team, work with a social worker, seek services or products from a business, or learn about laws and the legal system, our socialization sources are rapidly multiplied based on how many institutions with which we have contact. Most of the messages we receive about how to be, whom to "look up to" and "look down on," what rules to follow, what roles to play, what assumptions to make, what to believe, and what to think will probably reinforce or contradict what we have learned at home.

We might learn at school that girls shouldn't be interested in a woodworking shop class, that only white students go out for the tennis team, that kids who learn differently or think independently get put in special education, that it's okay for wealthy kids to miss classes for a family vacation, that it's okay to harass the boy who walks and talks like a girl, that most of the kids who drop out are from the south side of town, that "jocks" don't have to do the same work that "nerds" do to pass, or that kids who belong to another religious group are "weird." We learn who gets preferential treatment and who gets picked on. We are exposed to rules, roles, and assumptions that are not fair to everyone.

If we are members of the groups that benefit from the rules, we may not notice that they aren't fair. If we are members of the groups that are penalized by the rules, we may have a constant feeling of discomfort. We learn that these rules, roles, and assumptions are part of a structure that is larger than just our families. We get consistent similar messages from religion, the family doctor, the social worker, the local store, or the police officer, and so it is hard to not believe what we are learning. We learn that black people are more likely to steal, so store detectives follow them in stores. Boys are expected to fight and use violence, so they are encouraged to learn how. We shouldn't stare at or ask questions about disabled people; it isn't polite. Gay and lesbian people are sick and perverted. Kids who live in certain sections of town are probably on welfare, taking our hard-earned tax dollars. Money talks. White means good; black means bad. Girls are responsible for birth control. It's a man's world. Jews are cheap. Arabs are terrorists. And so on.

We are inundated with unquestioned and stereotypical messages that shape how we think and what we believe about ourselves and others. What makes this "brainwashing" even more insidious is the fact that it is woven into every structural thread of the fabric of our culture. The media (television, the Internet, advertising, newspapers, and radio), our language patterns, the lyrics to songs, our cultural practices and holidays, and the very assumptions on which our society is built all contribute to the reinforcement of the biased messages and stereotypes we receive. Think about Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, *Married with Children*, beer and car advertising, talk radio, *girl vs. man*, Christmas vacation, the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb," the "old boy's network," and websites that foster hate. We could identify thousands of examples to illustrate the oppressive messages that bombard us daily from various institutions and aspects of our culture, reinforcing our divisions and "justifying" discrimination and prejudice.

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ENFORCEMENTS (ARROW NO. 2)

It might seem logical to ask why people don't just begin to think independently if they don't like what they are seeing around them. Why don't we ignore these messages if we are uncomfortable with them, or if they are hurting us? Largely, we don't ignore the messages, rules, roles, structures, and assumptions because there are enforcements in place to maintain them. People who try to contradict the "norm" pay a price for their independent thinking, and people who conform (consciously or unconsciously) minimally receive the benefit of being left alone for not making waves, such as acceptance in their designated roles, being considered normal or "a team player," or being allowed to stay in their places. Maximally, they receive rewards and privileges for maintaining the status quo such as access to higher places; attention and recognition for having "made it" or being the model member of their group; or the privilege that brings them money, connections, or power.

People who go against the grain of conventional societal messages are accused of being troublemakers, of making waves, or of being "the cause of the problem." If they are members of target groups, they are held up as examples of why this group is inferior to the agent group. Examples of this include the significantly higher numbers of people of color who are targeted by the criminal justice system. Although the number of white people who are committing crimes is just as high, those whites are much less likely to be arrested, charged, tried, convicted, or sentenced to jail than are people of color. Do different laws apply depending on a person's skin color? Battering statistics are rising as more women assert their equal rights with men, and the number one suspect for the murder of women in the United States is the husband or boyfriend. Should women who try to be equal with men be killed? The rationale given by some racists for the burning of black churches was that "they were getting too strong." Does religious freedom and the freedom to assemble apply only to white citizens? Two men walking together in a southeastern U.S. city were beaten, and one died, because "they were walking so close, they must be gay." Are two men who refuse to abide by the "keep your distance" rule for men so threatening that they must be attacked and killed? These examples of differential punishment being given to members or *perceived* members of target groups are only half of the picture.

If members of agent groups break the rules, they too are punished. White people who support their colleagues of color may be called "n—— lover." Heterosexual men who take on primary child-care responsibilities, cry easily, or hug their male friends are accused of being dominated by their spouses, of being "sissies," or being gay. Middle-class people who work as advocates on economic issues are accused of being do-gooders or self-righteous liberals. Heterosexuals who work for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered people are immediately suspected of being "in the closet" themselves.

RESULTS (CIRCLE NO. 3)

It is not surprising that the results of this systematic learning are devastating to all involved. If we are examining our target identities, we may experience anger, a sense of being silenced, dissonance between what the United States stands for and what we experience, low self-esteem, high levels of stress, a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment that can lead to crime and self-destructive behavior, frustration, mistrust, and dehumanization. By participating in our roles as targets we reinforce stereotypes, collude in our own demise, and perpetuate the system of oppression. This learned helplessness is often called *internalized oppression* because we have learned to become our own oppressors from within.

If we are examining our agent identities, we may experience guilt from unearned privilege or oppressive acts, fear of payback, tendency to collude in the system to be self-protective, high levels of stress, ignorance of and loss of contact with the target groups, a sense of distorted reality about how the world is, fear of rising crime and violence levels,

limited worldview, obliviousness to the damage we do, and dehumanization. By participating in our roles as agents, and remaining unconscious of or being unwilling to interrupt the cycle, we perpetuate the system of oppression.

These results are often cited as the problems facing our society today: high drop-out rates, crime, poverty, drugs, and so on. Ironically, the root causes of them are inherent in the very assumptions on which the society is built: dualism, hierarchy, competition, individualism, domination, colonialism, and the scarcity principle. To the extent that we fail to interrupt this cycle we keep the assumptions, the problems, and the oppression alive.

A way that we might personally explore this model is to take one of the societal problems and trace its root causes back through the cycle to the core belief systems or patterns in U.S. society that feed and play host to it. It is not a coincidence that the United States is suffering from these results today; rather, it is a logical outcome of our embracing the status quo, without thinking or challenging.

ACTIONS (ARROW NO. 3)

When we arrive at the results of this terrible cycle, we face the decision of what to do next. It is easiest to do nothing, and simply to allow the perpetuation of the status quo. We may choose not to make waves, to stay in our familiar patterns. We may say, "Oh well, it's been that way for hundreds of years. What can I do to change it? It is a huge phenomenon, and my small efforts won't count for much." Many of us choose to do nothing because it is (for a while) easier to stay with what is familiar. Besides, it is frightening to try to interrupt something so large. "What does it have to do with me, anyway?" say many agents. "This isn't my problem. I am above this." We fail to realize that we have become participants just by doing nothing. This cycle has a life of its own. It doesn't need our active support because it has its own centrifugal force. It goes on, and unless we choose to interrupt it, it will continue to go on. Our silence is consent. Until our discomfort becomes larger than our comfort, we will probably stay in this cycle.

Some of us who are targets have been so beaten down by the relentless messages of the cycle that we have given up and resigned ourselves to survive it or to self-destruct. We are the victims of the cycle, and are playing our roles as victims to keep the cycle alive. We will probably go around a few more times before we die. It hurts too much to fight such a big cycle. We need the help of our brothers and sisters and our agent allies to try for change.

...

THE CORE OF THE CYCLE

As we begin to examine this decision, we may ask, "What has kept me in this cycle for so long?" Most answers are related to the themes listed in the core of the cycle: fear, ignorance, confusion, insecurity, power or powerlessness.

Fear—For targets, fear of interrupting the system reminds us of what happens to targets who challenge the existing power structure: being labeled as "trouble-makers," experiencing discrimination, being deported, raped, beaten, institutionalized, imprisoned, or killed. There are far too many examples like these. Some targets may decide not to take the risk.

For agents, the fear of interrupting the system is different. We fear losing our privilege if we interrupt the status quo. Will I be targeted with the targets? Will I have to face my own guilt for the years when I did nothing? Will I experience "pay-back" from targets if I acknowledge my role as an agent? Agent privilege sometimes allows us to avoid action, and the cycle continues.

Ignorance—For both targets and agents, lack of understanding about how oppression and socialization work makes it difficult to initiate change. Agents struggle more from our ignorance because we have not been forced to examine our roles. Because most of us have

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some agent and some target identities, we may be able to transfer what we learned in our target identities to educate ourselves in our agent identities. For example, a white lesbian may be able to translate her own experiences as a woman and a lesbian to understanding racism. This inability to see the connections may prevent us from interrupting the system.

Targets and agents both struggle with not seeing the big picture, and in our target identities, we may get caught in our own pain to the point that we cannot see the connections to other "isms." For example, a Black man may have experienced so much racism that he cannot identify with gay people or women in the U.S. This may prevent him from interrupting the systems of heterosexism and sexism.

Confusion—Oppression is very complex. It is difficult to know how to interrupt the system. That confusion sometimes prevents both targets and agents from taking action. "What if I use the wrong word when taking a stand on ableism? What if I don't know what to say when someone tells an offensive joke? What if I think I know more than I actually do?" Will I do more harm than good? Targets may know how to deal with their own category of oppression, but not categories in which they are agents. It's easy to make a mistake, and that confusion often prevents action.

Insecurity—Rarely have we been prepared for interrupting oppression, unless we went to a progressive school or worked in a progressive organization that has provided skill-building sessions. Most targets and agents feel somewhat insecure about taking a stand against oppression.

Power or Powerlessness—People with power have gained it through the existing system. It is difficult to risk losing it by challenging that same system. People without power may think they can't make a difference. As long as we are "living" in the Cycle of Socialization with the core themes holding us there, it will be difficult to break out of it, but people do it every day.

CHOOSING THE DIRECTION FOR CHANGE

How do people make the decision to interrupt the cycle and stand up for change? Sometimes the decision is triggered by a critical incident that makes oppression impossible to ignore. Perhaps a loved one is affected by some type of injustice or inequity, and we become motivated to speak out. Heterosexual parents of gay and lesbian children report that they became activists when they saw what their children were experiencing.

Perhaps we have a "last straw" experience, where things have become so intolerable that one last incident pushes us into action. Our discomfort becomes more powerful than our fear or insecurity, and we are compelled to take some action. Women who file sex discrimination suits after years of being overlooked professionally report this example; so do women who leave abusive relationships once and for all.

Sometimes it might be some new awareness or consciousness that we gain. Perhaps a friend from a different identity group shows us a different perspective, or we read a book that makes us think differently, or we enroll in a course that introduces new possibilities. We begin to see the big picture—that groups all over the world are working on these same issues. Change movements are filled with people who made decisions to interrupt the cycle of socialization and the system of oppression. Once you know something, you can't *not* know it anymore, and knowing it eventually translates into action.

These people often share qualities that have developed as a result of uniting for change. They share a sense of hope and optimism that we can dismantle oppression. They share a sense of their own efficacy—that they can make a difference in the world. They empower themselves and they support each other. They share an authentic human connection across their differences rather than fear because of their differences. They are humanized through action; not dehumanized by oppression. They listen to one another. They take one another's perspectives. They learn to love and trust each other. This is how the world changes.

7

The Cycle of Liberation

Bobbie Harro

As people come to a critical level of understanding of the nature of oppression and their roles in this systemic phenomenon, they seek new paths for creating social change and taking themselves toward empowerment or liberation. In my years as a social justice educator, it became increasingly clear that most socially conscious people truly want to “do something about” the injustices that they see and they recognize that simple, personal-level changes are not enough. They want to know how to make system-level change manageable and within their grasp, and they often become frustrated since so little has been written about the process of liberation.

As more students asked, “How do we make a dent in this thing that seems so big?” I began to think about how we might consciously transform the Cycle of Socialization. The cycle “teaches” us how to play our roles in oppression, and how to revere the existing systems that shape our thinking, leading us to blame uncontrollable forces, other people, or ourselves for the existence of oppression. If there is an identifiable pattern of events that repeats itself, becomes self-fulfilling, and leads us to a state of unconsciousness about issues of oppression, then there may be another identifiable pattern of events that leads us toward liberation from that thinking. I began to read about and study efforts to eliminate oppression on a systemic level, and discovered that indeed, some paths were successful at actually creating the kind of lasting change that addressed the root causes of the oppression, and people’s roles in it, while other paths were not. These paths were not always the same, and certainly were not linear, but they had in common the same cycle-like traits that characterized the socialization process that teaches us our roles in oppression. There were certain skills and processes, certain ways of thinking and acting in the world, certain seemingly necessary ingredients that were present in every successful liberation effort.

I am defining *liberation* as “critical transformation,” in the language and thinking of Paulo Freire. By this I mean that one must “name the problem” in terms of *systemic* assumptions, structures, rules, or roles that are flawed. Significant social change cannot happen until we are thinking on a systemic level. Many people who want to overcome oppression do not start in the critical transforming stage, but as they proceed in their efforts, it becomes necessary for them to move to that level for success.

The following model describes patterns of events common to successful liberation efforts. Its purpose is to organize and name a process that may otherwise be elusive, with the goal of helping people to find their pathway to liberation. It could be characterized as a map of changing terrain where not everyone goes in the same direction or to the same destination or at the same speed, so it should be taken not as a “how to,” but rather as a description of what has worked for some.

THE MODEL

The model described in this chapter combines theory, analysis, and practical experience. It describes a cyclical process that seems to occur in most successful social change efforts,

leading to some degree of liberation from oppression for those involved, regardless of their roles. It is important to note that one can enter the cycle at any point, through slow evolution or a critical incident, and will repeat or recycle many times in the process. There is no specific beginning or end point, just as one is never "done" working to end oppression. Although there is not a specific sequence of events in the cycle, it is somewhat predictable that all of the levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic) will occur at some point.

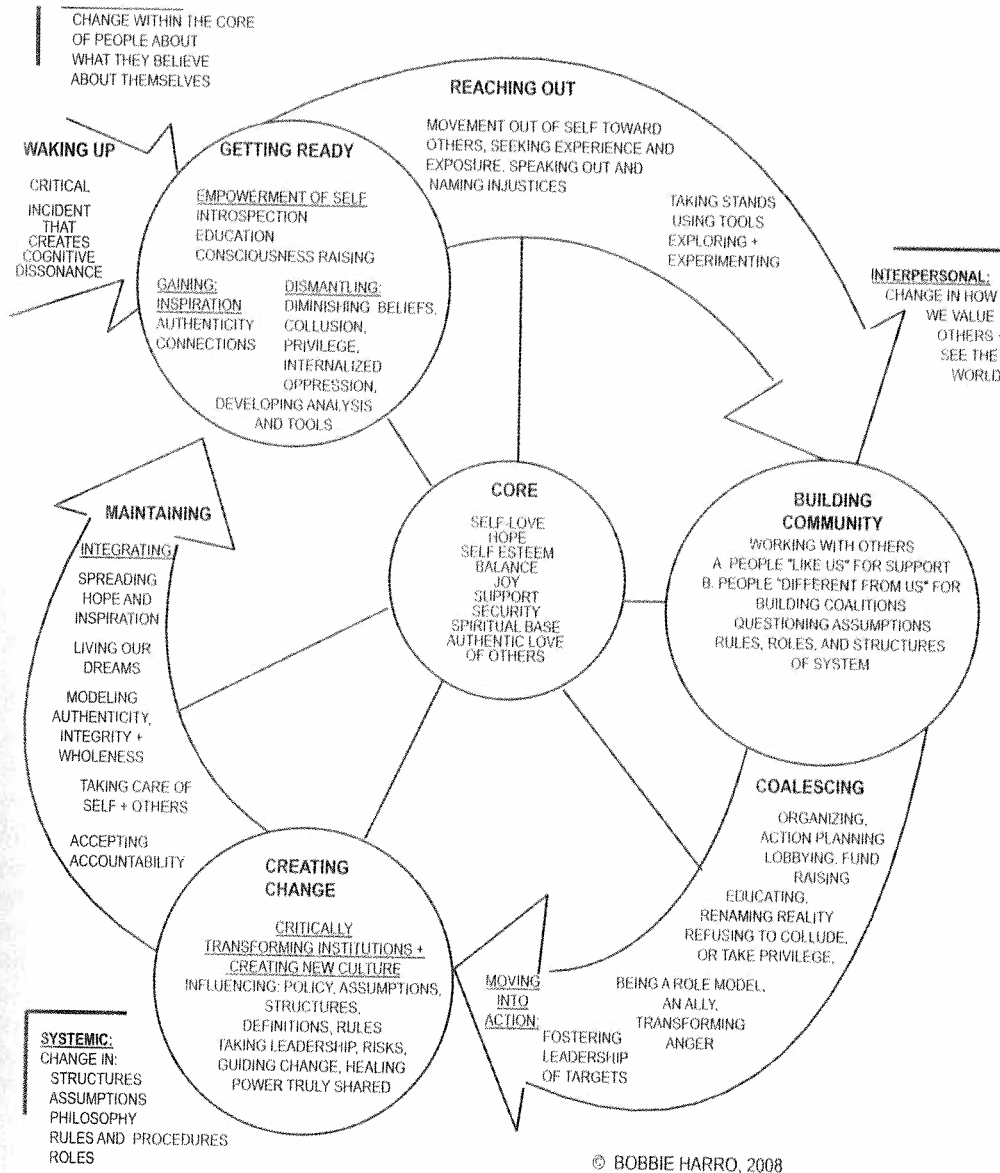


Figure 7.1 The Cycle of Liberation.

WAKING UP

Often liberation begins when a person begins to experience herself differently in the world than s/he has in the past. It is marked by an intrapersonal change: a change in the core of someone about what s/he believes about her/himself. This may be the result of a critical incident or a long slow evolutionary process that shifts our worldviews. I refer to this phase as the *waking up* phase. We may experience some form of cognitive dissonance, where something that used to make sense to us (or that we never questioned), ceases to make sense. Perhaps a white mother adopts a child who is Puerto Rican and in dealing with her expectations for the child suddenly realizes that she has more deeply based racist attitudes than she thought she did. Perhaps a heterosexual woman who has a gay coworker recognizes that the longer she works with him, the more "ordinary" he becomes to her, and the more she gets angry when people make antigay remarks. Perhaps a welfare recipient begins to get angry that she is often treated with disrespect by service providers and the general public, and begins to see the disrespect as a pattern of how poorer people are treated in the United States. Any of these examples could mark the beginning of the Cycle of Liberation.

GETTING READY

Once we know something, we can't *not* know it anymore. The process may not begin immediately, but odds are that it will begin at some point. Often the first part of the process involves a *getting ready* phase. This involves consciously dismantling and building aspects of ourselves and our worldviews based on our new perspectives. Processes that are central to this first part of liberation are introspection, education, and consciousness raising. We become introspective to identify which aspects of our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors need to be challenged. We tend to pay attention to and inventory thoughts, language, and actions to see if they are consistent with our newly recognized beliefs, or if they need to be dismantled. We may discover that we need to educate ourselves: read more, talk to people, bounce ideas and views around with others, begin listening to the news with new ears, seek expertise. We may begin to "make sense" of our experiences differently and seek out more chances to explore what we thought we knew, and how it compares to the reality. We may start exercising our questioning and challenging skills to expand our conscious understanding of the world.

This *getting ready* phase is composed of dismantling our wrong or diminishing beliefs (stereotypes, ignorance or misinformation), our discriminatory or privileged attitudes (superiority or inferiority), and behaviors that limit ourselves or others (collusion, oppressive language, or resignation). It also involves developing a consistency among what we believe, how we want to live our lives, and the way we actually do it. We move toward gaining authenticity and coherence between our worldview and how we live. We begin to see connections among all of the aspects of our lives and move toward integrity. Part of this phase also includes developing a coherent analysis of oppression and building a repertoire of skills and tools that will serve us throughout the rest of the process. We begin to take steps to empower ourselves.

The mother of the Puerto Rican child might decide to read about Puerto Rican history and cultures, talk to her Puerto Rican coworker, trace the origins of her assumptions and expectations about her child, or begin to catch herself when she makes excuses for her child's behavior. The heterosexual coworker may take a course on the gay rights movement, or pick up a copy of a gay newspaper, or ask her gay coworker to dinner. The woman on welfare may read a book on welfare rights, or start listening to the economic news, or start to keep a list of examples of "corporate welfare" totaling how much money goes from the federal government to large corporations when they are in financial trouble.

REACHING

Almost in the outside world, differences and experiences instead of new waves, and we realize that we have

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BUILDING

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is no more to blame for the oppression than we are—that, in fact, we are both victims of a larger system that pushed us into roles. With this realization, a new level of analysis begins, and it becomes inevitable and necessary to expand our dialogue to include “others.”

It’s important to note that both privileged groups and targeted groups need to find this support step. We can’t change *our* roles only; we must address changing the roles of *every-one* involved, as well as the assumptions and structures of the entire system, and we cannot do that alone. Coalitions are a necessity, and dialoguing across differences is the first step to building coalitions. We will never be able to focus on the real challenge—changing the system—until the barriers and boundaries that divide us are minimized. They will not be eliminated, but they can be significantly diminished in potency and clarified through the dialogue process.

This is not to say that creating dialogues about and across differences is easy. An integral part of this dialogue is exploring our differences, clarifying them, erasing assumptions, and replacing them with firsthand contact and good listening. That means that we must talk about our differences in a civil manner. It is useful, even desirable, to create together some guidelines for how our dialogues across differences will take place, and some principles to guide the process. These are best negotiated by all the parties who will participate.

Our mission is to question and challenge assumptions, structures and rules of the system of oppression, and to clarify our different needs, perceptions, strengths, resources, and skills in the process. Done well, these dialogues result in a deeper and richer repertoire of options and opportunities for changing the system. We are enhanced in many ways: our energy, our resources, our inspiration, our understanding, our compassion, our empathy, our humanness, and our motivation are all expanded in this process. We discover and are sustained by inspirations that we have not met before. With these new springboards, we move into the coalescing phase.

COALESCING

Having minimized our barriers, joined with allies, and fortified our resolve, we are ready to move into action to interrupt the oppressive system. We may organize, plan actions, lobby, do fund raising, educate and motivate members of the uninvolved public. We coalesce and discover that we have more power as a coalition. This gives us encouragement and confidence. We may find ourselves taking more overt stands, expressing ourselves more assertively, rallying people to support us as we respond to overt oppression. We have begun to “see our reality” differently, and are naming ourselves differently. We are a “we” now, rather than adversaries. We are on the same side as those in our coalition, and that often surprises and confuses the system. We are refusing to “play our roles” and “stay in our places” as we had done before. We are refusing to collude in oppression, and to participate in self-fulfilling prophecies. We are refusing to accept privileges, and we are acting as role models and allies for others. We are interrupting the status quo, by speaking out calmly and with self-confidence. In this process, we have transformed our energy away from anger, frustration, guilt, and mistrust, and toward hope, shared power, trust, and optimism. We begin to see evidence that, working together, and organizing, we can make a difference. This doesn’t mean that we will be successful at everything we try, but our likelihood of creating change is greatly enhanced.

CREATING CHANGE

The parameters of this phase of the cycle of liberation include using our critical analysis of the assumptions, structures, rules, and roles of the existing system of oppression, and our coalition power, to begin transforming the system. This means creating anew a culture

that reflects our coalition's collective identity: new assumptions, new structures, new roles, and new rules consistent with a more socially just and equitable philosophy. It includes operating from a shifted worldview, where the values of a diverse and united community shape the system. It involves forming partnerships across differences to increase shared power. This manifests in influencing structure, policy, and management of organizations and systems of which we are a part. It involves taking leadership, taking risks, and guiding change. We must continue to heal from past differences by sharing power and by redefining power as collective power, power within, and power created through cooperation. In this phase, the very essence of the system is transformed, and nothing can remain the same after the transformation.

People experience this kind of transformation on a personal level, when, for example they or someone in their family is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Priorities shift, and what is important becomes totally different. With regard to oppression, some examples of critical transformation have occurred when psychiatric facilities began to appoint consumers to their boards of directors, or when community funding agencies began to be run by community constituents rather than elected officials. Critical transformation may take place when an organization decides to use only consensus decision making for all policy decisions, or to use a flat collaborative management structure rather than hierarchical.

Critical transformation in our examples might happen like this. The heterosexual coworker and the gay coworker might organize a human rights committee in their workplace; conduct dialogues among employees and a public awareness campaign; design a new domestic partners' benefits amendment and a new policy protecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people from discrimination in the workplace. The person receiving welfare benefits might join a welfare rights coalition that lobbies local legislators, speak at a hearing in the state capital, and propose a referendum that for every dollar spent on "corporate welfare" in their state a dollar must also be spent on domestic welfare. The white mother of the Puerto Rican child might join a local Puerto Rican political action committee working to reform curriculum to include relevant Puerto Rican history, literature, famous people, and current events in her child's school. The committee might also be working to reform policies on bilingual education district-wide, so that her child can study and learn in both Spanish and English.

Efforts to critically transform systems are greatly enhanced by a wide range of resources, perspectives and creativity being brought to bear on a commonly defined problem. If good dialogue has taken place and the coalitions are as inclusive of every perspective as possible, systemic change becomes the logical outcome rather than an unlikely or unattainable goal. Making transformation happen is not, however, the last step. Creative new structures, assumptions, rules and roles must be maintained and nurtured.

MAINTAINING

In order to succeed, change needs to be strengthened, monitored, and integrated into the ritual of daily life. Just like anything new, it needs to be taken care of, learned about, "debugged," and modified as needed. It's rare if not impossible that new structures, assumptions, rules and roles are perfect or all-inclusive. It is imperative that a diverse group of "maintainers" work together to keep the change efforts aimed at their goals, and provided with resources. It's also necessary to celebrate successful change efforts. This process says to the larger world, "Look, this can work. You can change things by dialoguing and working together." It spreads hope and inspiration, and provides a model for others.

When a diverse group of people have worked to understand one another, and have created critical transformation together, we teach the lesson of hope and peace. It becomes increasingly possible that we can live our dream of equality and justice for all people. We

become more human, more whole, more authentic, more integrated, and by living this way, we increase the likelihood that the human species will survive.

THE CORE OF THE CYCLE OF LIBERATION

At the core of the cycle of liberation is a set of qualities or states of being that hold it together. Some of these are present when people first begin the cycle, and they are nurtured, elaborated on, filled out, and matured as we proceed through the various phases. They exist and operate on both the individual and collective levels throughout the process of liberation. They are made stronger with each phase and with each human connection we make. Liberation is *the practice of love*. It is developing a sense of self that we can love, and learning to love others with their differences from us. Liberation is *finding balance* in our individual lives and in the agendas of our coalitions. Balance keeps us upright and oriented, moving toward our goals. Liberation is the *development of competence*, the ability to make something happen consistent with a goal. It is taking charge of our own destiny and creating the world we want to live in, together with all the others we need to survive. Liberation is the *belief that we can succeed*, a sense of confidence in ourselves and in our collective efforts. Liberation is *joy* at our collective efficacy and at surviving in a world that sometimes tries to kill us. Liberation is the knowledge that *we are not alone*. It is mutual support, encouragement, and trust that others will be there if we fall, and that we need to be there for others. Liberation is *commitment* to the effort of critical transformation, to the people in our community, to the goal of equity and justice, and to love. Liberation is *passion and compassion*, those strong and motivating feelings that we must live by our hearts as well as our minds. Liberation is based in something far bigger than me as an individual, or us as a coalition, or our organization as a community, or any one nation, or any particular world. It's about that force that connects us all to one another as living beings, that force that is defined differently by every spiritual belief system but which binds us by the vision that there can be a better world and we can help to create it.