

THE FOUR "I's" OF OPPRESSION

Ideological Oppression

Any oppressive system has at its core the idea that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group. This idea gets elaborated in many ways-- more intelligent, harder working, stronger, more capable, more noble, more deserving, more advanced, chosen, normal, superior, and so on. The dominant group holds this idea about itself. And, of course, the opposite qualities are attributed to the other group--stupid, lazy, weak, incompetent, worthless, less deserving, backward, abnormal, inferior, and so on.

Institutional Oppression

The idea that one group is better than another group and has the right to control the other gets embedded in the institutions of the society--the laws, the legal system and police practice, the education system and schools, hiring policies, public policies, housing development, media images, political power, etc. When a woman makes two thirds of what a man makes in the same job, it is institutionalized sexism. When one out of every four African-American young men is currently in jail, on parole, or on probation, it is institutionalized racism. When psychiatric institutions and associations "diagnose" transgender people as having a mental disorder, it is institutionalized gender oppression and transphobia. Institutional oppression does not have to be intentional. For example, if a policy unintentionally reinforces and creates new inequalities between privileged and non-privileged groups, it is considered institutional oppression.

Interpersonal Oppression

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally disrespect or mistreat individuals in the oppressed group. Interpersonal racism is what white people do to people of color up close--the racist jokes, the stereotypes, the beatings and harassment, the threats, etc. Similarly, interpersonal sexism is what men do to women-- the sexual abuse and harassment, the violence directed at women, the belittling or ignoring of women's thinking, the sexist jokes, etc.

Most people in the dominant group are not consciously oppressive. They have internalized the negative messages about other groups, and consider their attitudes towards the other group quite normal.

A simple definition of racism, as a system, is: RACISM = PREJUDICE + POWER.

Internalized Oppression

The fourth way oppression works is within the groups of people who suffer the most from the mistreatment. Oppressed people internalize the ideology of inferiority, they see it reflected in the institutions, they experience disrespect interpersonally from members of the dominant group, and they eventually come to internalize the negative messages about themselves. If we have been told we are stupid, worthless, abnormal, and have been treated as if we were all our lives, then it is not surprising that we would come to believe it. Oppression always begins from outside the oppressed group, but by the time it gets internalized, the external oppression need hardly be felt for the damage to be done. If people from the oppressed group feel bad about themselves, and because of the nature of the system, do not have the power to direct those feelings back toward the dominant group without receiving more blows, then there are only two places to dump those feelings--on oneself and on the people in the same group. Thus, people in any target group have to struggle hard to keep from feeling heavy feelings of powerlessness or despair. They often tend to put themselves and others down, in ways that mirror the oppressive messages they have gotten all their lives. Acting out internalized oppression runs the gamut from passive powerlessness to violent aggression. It is important to understand that some of the internalized patterns of behavior originally developed to keep people alive--they had real survival value. On the way to eliminating institutional oppression, each oppressed group has to undo the internalized beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that stem from the oppression so that it can build unity among people in its group, support its leaders, feel proud of its history, contributions, and potential, develop the strength to challenge patterns that hold the group back, and organize itself into an effective force for social change.

Internalized Privilege

Likewise, people who benefit the most from these systems internalize privilege. Privileged people involuntarily accept stereotypes and false assumptions about oppressed groups made by dominant culture. Internalized privilege includes acceptance of a belief in the inherent inferiority of the oppressed group as well as the inherent superiority or normalcy of one's own privileged group. Internalized privilege creates an unearned sense of entitlement in members of the privileged group, and can be expressed as a denial of the existence of oppression and as paternalism.

The Four "I's" As An Interrelated System

It should be clear that none of these four aspects of oppression can exist separately. As the diagram below suggests, each is completely mixed up with the others. It is crucial to see any oppression as a system. It should also be clear that trying to challenge oppression in any of the four aspects will affect the other three.

