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Theoretical Foundations

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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Conceptual Foundations

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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).

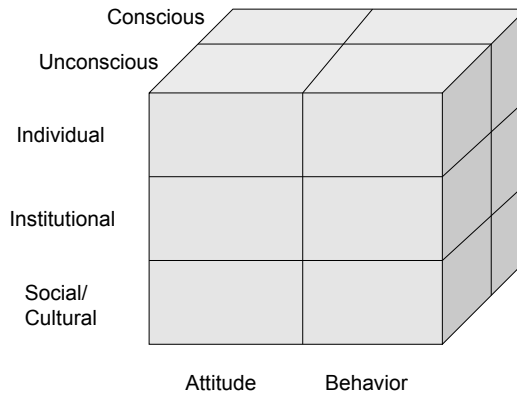


Figure 4.1 Multiple Dimensions of Oppression

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.

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.

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

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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

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 conscious-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

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.

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Five Faces of Oppression

Iris Marion Young

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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.

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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. . . .