

# FIVE FACES OF OPPRESSION

The following article is adapted from "Five Faces of Oppression" by Iris Young. The article was originally a chapter in Oppression, Privilege, & Resistance edited by Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (published by McGraw Hill in Boston, 2004).

In addition, the portion of this article that refers to the "Culture of Silence" is adapted from a chapter written by Paulo Freire called "Historical Conditioning and Levels of Consciousness" in his book The Politics of Education translated by Donald Macedo (published by Bergin & Garvey in London, 1971).

## What is Oppression?

In its traditional usage, oppression means the **exercise of tyranny by a ruling group**. Yet, oppression creates injustice in other circumstances as well. People are not always oppressed by cruel tyrants with bad intentions. In many cases, a well-intentioned liberal society can place system-wide constraints on groups and limit their freedom. Oppression can be the result of a few people's choices or policies that cause embedded unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols. These societal rules can become a restrictive structure of forces and barriers that immobilize and reduce a group or category of people.

No matter which definition you use, **oppression is when people reduce the potential for other people to be fully human**. In other words, oppression is when people make other people less human. This could mean treating them in a **dehumanizing** manner. But, it could also mean **denying people language, education, and other opportunities** that might make them become fully human in both mind and body.

People should be free to pursue life plans in their own way. Oppressive forces seek to diminish those plans and thus those people as well.

## What the Different Types of Oppression?

According to Iris Marion Young, there are five "faces" or types of oppression: **violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism**.

**Exploitation** is the **act of using people's labors to produce profit while not compensating them fairly**. People who work in sweat shops are exploited. Although they are paid for their efforts and toils, they are not paid a fair wage considering how much money they make for the company. Miners in Africa are also exploited when they have to rent their mining tools everyday. If these miners find nothing of value on any given day, then they owe for the supply rental and are not paid for their efforts.

**Exploitation uses capitalism to oppress**. The economic theory of capitalism states that people are free to exchange goods freely. Yet, whenever this has happened throughout history, it has created different classes of people: wealthy and poor. Karl Marx, the father of socialism, said that capitalism creates "haves" (those that have wealth) and "have-nots"

(those that do not have wealth). Typically in a capitalistic society, the “haves” end up exploiting the “have-nots” for their hard work. Therefore, exploitation creates a system that perpetuates class differences, keeping the rich richer and the poor poorer.

**Marginalization** is the act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society. Overall, it is a process of exclusion.

Marginalization is in some ways worse than exploitation because society has decided that it cannot or will not use these people even for labor. Most commonly, people are marginalized based upon race. One prominent example is the Aboriginal communities of Australia that were excluded from society and pushed farther and farther away from their homelands as cities grew. The marginalization of Aborigines happened when society met the needs of white people and not the needs of the marginalized themselves. Thus, marginalization is closely linked to the idea of whiteness.

In the U.S., most marginalized groups are racially marked. Yet, this racial exclusion also occurs in countries outside the U.S.—Blacks or Indians in Latin America, and Blacks, East Indians, and Eastern Europeans, or North Africans in Europe.

Yet, marginalization is by no means the fate only of racially marked people. In the United States a shamefully large proportion of the population is marginal: elderly people who are fired from their jobs; young Blacks or Latinos who cannot find their first or second jobs; many single mothers and their children; other people involuntarily unemployed; many mentally and physically disabled people; and American Native Indians, especially those on reservations.

Marginalization expels a whole category of people from useful participation in social life. As a result, these groups are subjected to severe material deprivation (they don't have access to basic resources) and even extermination (such as genocide).

The idea of **powerlessness** links to Marx's theory of socialism: some people “have” power while others “have-not”. The powerless are dominated by the ruling class and are situated to take orders and rarely have the right to give them. Some of the fundamental injustices associated with powerlessness are inhibition to develop one's capacities, lack of decision making power, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the lowered status.

In the U.S., the powerless do not participate in basic democratic processes because they feel that they can't or that their participation won't mean anything. In most cases, it means not voting or participating in any decision making process.

However, the deeper forms of powerlessness are far more insidious. Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire believes that powerlessness is the strongest form of oppression because it allows people to oppress themselves and others. It is easiest to explain by making a connection to Harriet Tubman, a famous freed African American runaway slave and abolitionist. Tubman once wrote “I would have free thousands more, if they had known they were slaves.” In these words, Tubman conveys that some slaves felt so

powerless, thought so little of themselves, and were so indoctrinated by the mindsets of their slave masters that they didn't realize that they were slaves. In fact, it's quite possible some slaves didn't even realize that something was wrong with society and that they were being treated unjustly.

This is an example of powerlessness that creates what Freire calls a **Culture of Silence**. According to Freire, oppressed people become so powerless that they do not even talk about their oppression. If they reach this stage of oppression, it creates a culture wherein it is forbidden to even mention the injustices that are being committed. The oppressed are silenced. They have no voice and no will.

Of course, there are still varying levels of silence. A surface level of silence is when the oppressed know they are being oppressed but cannot talk about it or voice their suffering or concerns. African American slavery in the U.S. provides a prime example. Slaves were forbidden to talk to one another about their horrid situations and many lacked the words to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Yet, slaves were extremely resourceful and would find hidden ways to voice themselves.

A deeper level of silencing occurs through **indoctrination**. At this stage, the oppressed actually believe that they are "naturally inferior" to the ruling class. They are taught by oppressors that **their inferiority is normal and a fact of life**. They do not know that they have a voice. In addition, education and literacy are withheld so as to prevent them from gaining knowledge about themselves and stop them from finding means to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

According to Freire, one of the main means of indoctrinating the oppressed is to give them negative images of themselves. The oppressed are dehumanized and taught to believe the negative perceptions as fact. The most dangerous part of this process of indoctrination is when these negative images are internalized and become a part of the oppressed person's own beliefs. At this point, the oppressed aren't silent because they are forced to be; they are silent because they choose to be.

The only way to fight against powerlessness and the Culture of Silence is to **gain a greater consciousness**. Oppressed people throughout history have gained a greater understanding and consciousness of themselves and others through education, literacy, and self-reflection. It is through the act of using their voice and gaining a critical perspective of their oppressors that the oppressed are able to free themselves of indoctrination and (eventually) free their bodies from oppression as well. Freire calls this process of gaining critical consciousness **conscientization**.

**Cultural Imperialism** involves taking the culture of the ruling class and establishing it as the norm. The groups that have power in society control how the people in that society interpret and communicate. Therefore, the beliefs of that society are the most widely disseminated and express the experience, values, goals and achievements of these groups. American culture is built upon the Judeo-Christian belief systems coupled with an Anglo culture derived from Britain. As a result, America's fundamental beliefs and values are the same as Christian beliefs and values and Anglicized/White beliefs and values. While

America does not have an official language, it is no surprise that English is the dominant language and other languages are looked down upon.

Cultural imperialism has persisted over time. Modern India is a good example. India was colonized by the British Empire. Their language and some of their belief system was taken over by the language and belief system of the British. Therefore, modern Indians speak English and have many mannerisms of the British generations after their enslavement by Britain has ended.

Across the world, sexuality is a common example of cultural imperialism. The dominant group in society is heterosexual, so all other types of sexuality are grouped as Others and viewed as inferior or abnormal. Culture and education systems reinforce the notion that heterosexuality is normal and better (a social phenomenon called "heteronormity"). Those who have different types of sexuality are told to become heterosexual.

Those who are oppressed by cultural imperialism are both marked by stereotypes and made to feel invisible. The stereotypes define what they can and cannot be. At the same time, these same stereotypes turn these people into a mass of Others that lack separate identities. The White male can have a distinct identity and be an individual because he holds the most power. All other groups are just "groups" of Others.

**Violence** is probably the most obvious and visible form of oppression. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property. These attacks do not necessarily need a motive but are intended 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 violence as well. All forms of sexual violence and hate crimes are prevalent examples of violent oppression. Most, if not all, violent oppression is the direct result of xenophobia (an intense and irrational fear of people, ideas, or customs that seem strange or foreign).