

Power & Privilege Definitions

INSTITUTIONAL POWER: The ability or official authority to decide what is best for others. The ability to decide who will have access to resources. The capacity to exercise control over others.

PREJUDICE: A judgment or opinion that is formed on insufficient grounds before facts are known or in disregard of facts that contradict it. Prejudices are learned and can be unlearned.

STEREOTYPE: An exaggerated or distorted belief that attributes characteristics to members of a particular group, simplistically lumping them together and refusing to acknowledge differences among members of the group.

OPPRESSION: The combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called “target groups”) and benefits other groups (often called “dominant groups”). Examples of these systems are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism. These systems enable dominant groups to exert control over target groups by limiting their rights, freedom, and access to basic resources such as health care, education, employment, and housing.

Four Levels of Oppression/”isms” and Change:

- **Personal:** Values, Beliefs, Feelings
- **Interpersonal:** Actions, Behaviors, Language
- **Institutional:** Rules, Policies, Procedures
- **Cultural:** Beauty, Truth, Right

PRIVILEGE: Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels and gives advantages, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of target groups. In the United States, privilege is granted to people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups:

- White people;
- Able-bodied people;
- Heterosexuals;
- Males;
- Christians;
- Middle or owning class people;
- Middle-aged people;
- English-speaking people

Privilege is characteristically invisible to people who have it. People in dominant groups often believe that they have earned the privileges that they enjoy or that everyone could have access to these privileges if only they worked to earn them. In fact, privileges are unearned and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent.

Unlike targets of oppression, people in dominant groups are frequently unaware that they are members of the dominant group due to the privilege of being able to see themselves as persons rather than stereotypes.

TARGETS OF OPPRESSION: Targets of oppression are members of social identity groups that are disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized in a variety of ways by agents of oppression and the agent's systems or institutions. Targets of oppression are subject to containment, having their choices and movements restricted and limited, are seen and treated as expendable and replaceable, without an individual identity apart from their group, and are compartmentalized into narrowly defined roles.

Targets of oppression are people subjected to exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Targets of oppression are kept in their place by the agent of oppression's ideology, which supports oppression by denying that it exists and blames the conditions of oppression on actions of the targets.

Targets of oppression have fewer "life chances" or benefits as a result of their membership in a particular social group. As examples, there is a higher likelihood that African American males will be arrested than white males; there is a greater chance that males will have a higher salary than females; and there is a higher probability that persons using a wheelchair for mobility will have fewer job opportunities than non-disabled people.

AGENTS OF OPPRESSION: Agents of oppression are members of the dominant social groups in the United States, privileged by birth or acquisition, which knowingly or unknowingly exploit and reap unfair advantage over members of groups that are targets of oppression. Agents of oppression are also trapped by the system of institutionalized oppression that benefits them and are confined to roles and prescribed behaviors. In United States culture, agents have the power to define the "norm" for what is reality and they see themselves as normal or proper, whereas targets are likely to be labeled as deviant, evil, abnormal, substandard, or defective.

RACE: Someone has said that "race is a pigment of our imagination". That is a clever way of saying that race is actually an invention. It is a way of arbitrarily dividing humankind into different groups for the purpose of keeping some on top and some at the bottom; some in and some out. And its invention has very clear historical roots; namely, colonialism. "Race is an arbitrary socio-biological classification created by Europeans during the time of world wide colonial expansion, to assign human worth and social status, using themselves as the model of humanity, for the purpose of legitimizing white power and white skin privilege" (*Crossroads-Interfaith Ministry for Social Justice*).

To acknowledge that race is a historical arbitrary invention does not mean that it can be, thereby, easily dispensed with as a reality in people's lives. To acknowledge race as an invention of colonialism is not the same as pretending to be color blind or declaring, "I don't notice people's race!" Our world has been ordered and structured on the basis of skin color and that oppressive ordering and structuring is RACISM.

RACISM: Racism is a system in which one race maintains supremacy over another race through a set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures, and institutional power. Racism is a “system of structured dis-equality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges, and benefits of the society are available to individuals according to their presumed membership in” particular racial groups (Barbara Love, 1994. *Understanding Internalized Oppression*). A person of any race can have prejudices about people of other races, but only members of the dominant social group can exhibit racism because racism is prejudice plus the institutional power to enforce it.

ALLY: An ally is a person whose commitment to dismantling oppression is reflected in a willingness to do the following:

- Educate oneself about oppression;
- Learn from and listen to people who are targets of oppression;
- Examine and challenge one’s own prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions;
- Work through feelings of guilt, shame, and defensiveness to understand what is beneath them and what needs to be healed;
- Learn and practice the skills of challenging oppressive remarks, behaviors, policies, and institutional structures;
- Act collaboratively with members of the target group to dismantle oppression.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION: The process whereby people in the target group make oppression internal and personal by coming to believe that the lies, prejudices, and stereotypes about them are true. Members of target groups exhibit internalized oppression when they alter their attitudes, behaviors, speech, and self-confidence to reflect the stereotypes and norms of the dominant group. Internalized oppression can create low self-esteem, self-doubt, and even self-loathing. It can also be projected outward as fear, criticism, and distrust of members of one’s target group.

Definitions were abridged from:

© Leaven 2003 *Doing Our Own Work: A Seminar for Anti-Racist White Women*

© Visions, Inc. and the MSU Extension Multicultural Awareness Workshop