

THE FOUR "I's" OF OPPRESSION

By John Bell

If any random group of human beings had a chance to listen to each other about the reality of their lives at a deep level, it would be clear that most, if not all, of them had suffered systematic disrespect and mistreatment simply because they had grown up in a particular group in society.

In my view, all people are or have been oppressed—that is, systematically denied equal justice, opportunity, freedom, or the development of their full humanness. This is not to say that all oppressions are equal. Oppression is different for each group, some more damaging and vicious than others. Some groups are coerced or offered "benefits" for playing oppressive roles towards other groups. All people have been forced into a more limited life by their societal conditioning. All people have had their share of systematic mistreatment, miseducation, and disrespect which has warped their full humanness.

The following outlines four interrelated faces of any oppression, which can help people understand how oppression is a system, not just prejudice. For example, when most people, including young people, are asked what racism is, they say it is prejudice or discrimination against people of color. This is certainly a part of racism, but only the most visible, personally experienced part of a vast web of forces.

Ideological Oppression

First, 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, 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, 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 gay or lesbian couples were banned from the military, it was institutionalized gay oppression. When young people are excluded from decision-making in almost every area that affects their lives, it is institutionalized oppression of young people, or adultism.

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, the whole range of personal acts of discrimination. 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 pornography, 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.

No "reverse racism". These kinds of oppressive attitudes and behaviors are backed up by the institutional arrangements. This helps to clarify the confusion around what some claim to be "reverse racism". People of color can have prejudices against and anger towards white people, or individual white people. They can act out those feelings in destructive and hurtful ways towards whites. But in almost every case, this acting out will be severely punished. The force of the police and the courts, or at least a gang of whites getting even, will come crashing down on those people of color. The individual prejudice of black people, for example, is not backed up by the legal system and prevailing white institutions. The oppressed group, therefore, does not have the power to enforce its prejudices, unlike the dominant group. For example, the racist beating of Rodney King was carried out by the institutional force of the police, and upheld by the court system. This would never have happened if King had been white and the officers black.

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

Therefore, with this definition of the systemic nature of racism, people of color cannot be racist. The same formula holds true for all forms of oppression. The dominant group has its mistreatment of the target group embedded in and backed up by society's institutions and other forms of power. Women cannot be sexist.

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 and worthless and have been treated as if we were all our lives, then it is not surprising that we would come to believe it. This makes us feel bad.

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, including their own children, 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. For example, many a slave mother had to systematically beat her male child in order to break his strong will, so that he would "submit" to the horrors of the slave master and not be killed. Some claim that the practice of "the dozens"--a game of exchanging ever-sharper insults without losing control--is a direct descendant of the slavery conditioning to survive brutal insults.

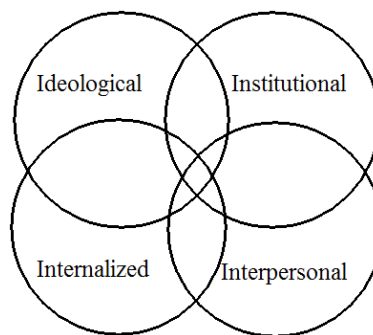
Currently, internalized racism, for example, takes many forms for people of color. Here is a sampling:

- acting out feelings of rage, fear, or powerlessness at people one is closest to;
- the invalidation of children which helps destroy self-confidence;
- Black people killing other Black people in the streets;
- attacking or criticizing community leaders who have the courage to step forward and raise the issues;
- being ashamed or critical of the way some People of Color act--e.g., "he's too bourgeois," or "she's too white", or "he's a clown", or "he's a wanna be"--in some way saying that "s/he is not one of us";

- having to look "cool" or "tough" even when feeling tender, or vulnerable.
- feeling stupid or worthless or powerless.

On the way to eliminating 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 clean its own house of cultural patterns that hold the group back, set high standards and oppose corruption, and organize itself into an effective force for social change.

The Four "I's" as an Interrelated System



The Four "I's" of Oppression

It should be clear that none of these four aspects of oppression can exist separately. As the diagram above 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.

Finally, [here](#) is an animated adaptation of the Four I's of Oppression by Eliana Pipes.

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