

What is Oppression?

Madness and Oppression, 6-7

The Icarus Project

“Oppression is the systemic and institutional abuse of power by one group at the expense of others and the use of force to maintain this dynamic. An oppressive system is built around the ideology of superiority of some groups and inferiority of others. This ideology makes those designated as inferior feel confined, ‘less than’, and hinders the realization of their full spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological well-being and potential. They are portrayed as “others” and are marginalized via social, mental, emotional, and physical violence which prevents their full inclusion in the community. All actions, systems, cultures, ideologies, and technologies which refuse to take full and equitable consideration of everyone and everything affected by them are aspects of oppression.

Oppression enables those in charge to have access to control resources and choices, while making those labeled as inferior vulnerable to poverty, violence, and early death. It is a set of processes, actions, and ideas that hinder the oppressed from exercising their full freedom of choice and have access to resources. These systems of inequity operate at internalized, institutional, and interpersonal levels to distribute advantages to some and to disadvantage others. Oppression is the tool that preserves existing unjust social relations and protects existing monopolies of power/privilege. It responds with violence when those with lesser power and privilege try to challenge those inequities.

Oppression manifests itself as systemic, structural, historically naturalized, and institutionalized violence that is normalized through hegemony, ideology, sheer repetition of dominant discourse, etc. It boxes the oppressed into categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other divisions that supposedly distinguish the “normal” from the “abnormal”. Those whose existence deviates from the norm are a threat to dominant elites and oppression keeps them in line through shaming and enforcing their powerlessness.

Oppression actively provides unearned privileges and protections to some members of our community, allowing them to ignore the presence of classism, racism, ableism, fat hatred, sexism, homophobia, transphobia or any of the many systemic oppressive themes that live in our culture. It allows them to use this power and privilege, whether consciously or subconsciously, in order to achieve and acquire status or wealth at the expense of the oppressed. In a sense, this unearned privilege harms the oppressor as much as the oppressed because it keeps them sheltered and limits their ability to relate to a diverse range of people. The first step in transforming an oppressive system is to recognize our own privileges and to understand the connection between our privilege and the suffering of others.

Patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, heterosexism, racism, ableism, ageism, militarism, colonialism are all examples of oppression.”

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