

Oppression

I. Injustice

Plausibly, justice and injustice come in different forms. One form of justice, for example, is distributive. If we agree to share a pizza, we each pay half (assume we are the same size and are equally hungry), and yet you take 9/10 of the pie and leave me one slice, that is unfair. Such unfairness, especially when it is expanded to a broader social context, seems unjust. Another form of justice is criminal justice. If you and I commit the same crime, but after trials at which we are both found guilty you are sentenced for 1 year in prison and I'm sentenced to 5 years in prison, that's unfair. Another form of injustice is oppression. What is oppression and how does it differ from other sorts of injustice?

II. Structures and Power

Historically, the notion of oppression has been associated with the idea of dictators and tyrants. The model of power underlying this is one in which individuals hold power over others and exercise that power unjustly. Oppression in this sense (let's call it *individual oppression*, though it may be a group rather than an individual who is the dominant force) may still occur—found in many domains, from governments to families—but it is now generally recognized not to be the only form of oppression.

Another form of oppression occurs in structures and institutions, and so reasonably is called *structural oppression*. The power at issue in structural oppression is not held by an individual but is diffused in a system. Consider, for example, a democratic system in which majority rules. In such a system there is no tyrant dominating others, nevertheless the majority hold power and can make decisions that benefit them and disadvantage the minority. Power is circulated in even seemingly trivial matters, e.g., the design and distribution of restroom facilities.

Marilyn Frye offers a characterization of the phenomenon of oppression in terms of a cage:

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barrier which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (Frye 1983, 4)

Although Frye emphasizes the idea that when one is oppressed, all of one's options are blocked and one is *trapped*, this is not necessarily the case. What's at issue in oppression is that by virtue of one's membership in a particular group *one is subject to a set of structures that cause unjust subordination*. The birdcage analogy is useful to see how structures rather than individuals may be to blame for one's subordination, it is important not to be misled by the analogy.

III. Group membership

Oppression is structural, and it applies to individuals by virtue of their membership in groups. Is there a way to make this clearer? It is helpful to view societies as very complicated sets of relations between people. There are professors and students, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, bus drivers and riders, etc. Such relationships a part of an economy, which exists within a social-political structure. For example, without a background system of private property there could be no landlords and tenants; without institutions of higher learning there could be no professors and students. The nature of such relationships is defined by laws, institutional rules, and social norms. Oppression occurs when the relations constituting a social system—or part of a social system—are unjust and where exit from the relations is either impossible, or extremely costly for the individual in the subordinate position. To take an extreme example, slavery is oppressive because the relation between slave and master is unjust and slaves have little or no option for exit. Sweatshops are oppressive because the relation between owners and laborers is unjust (the laborers are being exploited), and the laborers have no reasonable economic alternatives for supporting themselves and their families.

So what can we say about oppression?

1. Oppression is objective. It is not a subjective feeling of being trapped. Whether one is systematically disadvantaged by a structure is something that can be empirically established.
2. Oppression is structural and systematic. Although individuals may be involved in enforcing and perpetuating the structure, the oppressing force is the unjust structure. Members of subordinated groups may also enforce and perpetuate oppressive structures that disadvantage themselves.
3. One is subject to oppression by virtue of one's membership in a group. Oppression involves two groups in relation to a structure: the subordinated and the privileged. The privileged are those who (unjustly) benefit from the structure; the subordinated are those who (unjustly) bear the costs.
4. Oppression occurs or is most problematic when one's membership in the subordinated group is either non-voluntary, or a central member of one's identity, so exit from the group is not a reasonable option.

IV. Faces of Oppression (Young 1990)

1. Exploitation: Exploitation occurs "...through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another. The injustice of class division does not consist only in the distributive fact that some people have great wealth while most people have little. Exploitation enacts a structure relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality." (6)

Examples: *gender exploitation*: "transfer of the fruits of material labor to men and transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men." (7)

Racially specific exploitation: "Wherever there is racism, there is the assumption, more or less enforced, that members of the oppressed racial groups are or ought to be servants of those, or some of those, in the privileged group...." (7-8)

2. Marginalization: Marginalization occurs when "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination."(9) "Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use." (8)

Examples: The elderly, the poor, the disabled. The harm of marginalization is not just the material deprivation experienced, but also the fact that marginals are prevented from "[exercising] capacities in socially defined and recognized ways." (9)

3. Powerlessness – "The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. Powerlessness also designates a position in the division of labor and the concomitant social position that allows person little opportunities to develop and exercise skills. The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect." (10)

Examples: Non-professionals are powerless relative to professionals.

4. Cultural Imperialism – "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other." (12)

Examples: Androcentrism. Heteronormativity. Cisgenderism. Marginalization in the US of native Spanish-speakers and Latino culture. Note also *ethnocentrism*:

An attitude that one's own culture, society, or group is inherently superior to all others. Judging other cultures by your own cultural standards and since, of course, other cultures are different, they

are therefore inferior. Ethnocentrism means an inability to appreciate others whose culture may include a different racial group, ethnic group, religion, morality, language, political system, economic system, etc. It also means an inability to see a common humanity and human condition facing all women and men in all cultures and societies beneath the surface variations in social and cultural traditions.

FROM: <http://www.webref.org/sociology/e/ethnocentrism.htm>.

Both individuals and institutions can be ethnocentric.

5. Systematic Violence – “What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systematic character, its existence as a social practice.” (13) “Violence is systemic because directed at members of groups simply because they are members of that group....The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge...that they are *liable* to violation solely on account of their group identity.” (13) This threat deprives people of freedom and dignity.

These different “faces” of oppression can affect members of different groups (races, genders) differently, and combine to result in what is sometimes called *intersectional oppression*.

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