

Oppression

The combination of prejudice and institutional power, which creates a system that, discriminates against some groups ("target groups") and benefits other groups ("dominant groups").

EXAMPLES:

Racism

Sexism

Heterosexism

Ableism

Classism

Ageism

Stereotype

An exaggerated or distorted belief that attributes characteristics to members of a particular group. Stereotypes are characterized by lumping ALL people in a social group together.

EXAMPLES:

All black people are good at basketball.

Asian women are bad drivers.

Indian men either run gas stations or are doctors.

All Muslim women are unhappy in their marriages.

Institutional Power

Institutional Power refers to the ability or official authority of an institution (like a hospital, a court, or a school) to decide what is best for others. When an institution uses its power unfairly it can decide who will have access to resources, services, or education based on unfair criteria or prejudiced standards. This can benefit one group or limit the choices of another.

EXAMPLES:

The Supreme Court ruling that abortion is illegal keeps women in an inferior position. In this case the courts extend their power into the reproductive rights of women.

Schools developing a tracking system that teaches some students only vocational skills. In this case educational systems pre-determine the access to knowledge and experiences of some students, and create a class divide.

Personal Power

The ability of an individual to determine the course of their lives through their own choices and actions. Personal power includes the skill, agency and authority of an individual.

EXAMPLES:

A student advocating for themselves that they should be placed in an AP literature class because their reading skills and interests merit it.

A client at the bank asking for full disclosure in the bank's assessment of their credit-worthiness to buy a house.

A tenant seeking the services of a lawyer to contest an unfair increase in their rent.

Prejudice

A judgment or opinion a person forms based on a hunch or past experiences with a different person. Prejudices are often based on inaccurate information and damage a relationship between two people, or communities. Prejudices are learned and can be unlearned.

EXAMPLES:

A white woman locks her car doors when a black man passes.

Adults cross the street to the other side when they see a group of teenagers approaching.

A store owner follows a young man wearing baggy pants around his store because he suspects shoplifting.

Unpacking Power Definitions

ELEMENTS OF OPPRESSION

Divide your participants into four groups. Assign each group one of the following elements of oppression. Ask each group to identify three to five examples of the type of oppression they were assigned.

ELEMENTS OF OPPRESSION	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE 1	EXAMPLE 2	EXAMPLE 3
Interpersonal	Oppression that exists between individual people . This is oppression when it is actuated by an individual who draws on power from a greater system or structure.			
Relational	The actions, behaviors, language and behavioral norms actuated by groups. Oppression that exists between social groups .			
Institutional	Rules, policies, procedures. Oppression that is manifested, rooted in, and supported by laws, systems, structures, and policies .			
Cultural Norms and Values	Beauty, truth, and rights. Oppression that is actuated through values, belief structures, and cultural representations .			

Unpacking Power Definitions

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

The following list of terms and definitions are helpful talking points to support the Understanding Privilege discussion.

Targets of Oppression: Targets of oppression are members of social identity groups that are marginalized, 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.

Privilege: Privilege operates on personal, relational, 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.

People in the Privilege groups are often unaware that they are in a group of privilege.

Race: 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.

To acknowledge that race is a historical arbitrary invention does not mean that we can ignore it and its impact on people and their people's lives. To acknowledge race as an invention of colonialism is not the same to say that we can be "colorblind" or not see color. Race, even though an invention, colors peoples' lives in very real ways.

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.