

THE FOUR I'S OF OPPRESSION

Ideological

- The very intentional ideological development of the ...isms

Examples: dominant narratives, "Othering"

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

- Is demonstrated in how institutions and systems reinforce and manifest ideology

Examples: media, medical, legal, education, religion, psychiatry, banking/financial

The idea that one group is better than another 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, hiring practices, public policy, housing development, media images, political power, etc. When a woman makes 2/3 of what a man makes, it is institutionalized sexism, When 1 out of 4 African American men are in jail or on probation, it is institutionalized racism, etc. Consider that dominant culture also controls the language itself used to describe all groups in society and can make things visible or invisible when necessary.

Other examples/things to consider are the "War on Drugs" instead of "War on Poverty", as well as an expanded definition of **violence** and how violence towards targeted groups happens at a systemic level.

Interpersonal

- The way we play violence out on each other, based on oppression

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into our institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally mistreat individuals in the targeted/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/harassment, the violence directed at women, the sexist jokes, ignoring or minimizing of women's thinking, etc.

Many people in the dominant group are not consciously oppressive. They have internalized the negative messages about other groups, and consider their attitudes towards other groups quite normal.

No 'reverse racism'. These kinds of attitudes and behaviors are backed up by the institutional arrangements. This helps to clarify the confusion around what some claim to be 'reverse ism's'. 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, as has always been the case throughout history. 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: PREJUDICE + POWER=RACISM
This can be applied to any 'ism'.

Internalized

- How we internalize the ideological ideas of oppression

Internalized oppression means the oppressor doesn't have to exert any more pressure, because we now do it to ourselves and each other.

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 mistreatment *interpersonally* from members of the dominant group, and they eventually come to *internalize* the negative messages about themselves.

Oppression always begins from the outside of 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. (HORIZONTAL VIOLENCE) Thus, people in any target group have to struggle hard to keep from feeling heavy feelings of powerlessness or despair.

On the way to eliminating institutional oppression, each oppressed group has to undo the internalized beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that stem from the oppression so that they can build unity and power among people in that group, support its leaders, feel proud of its contributions and develop strength and organize.

The 4 I's as an Interrelated System

It should be clear that none of these four aspects of oppression can exist separately; each is completely supported by the others. It should be clear that any attempt to dismantle oppression should include an element of challenge at all four levels to truly result in change.

