

**SWS Factsheet: Oppression Without Bigots**  
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**Introduction: Examining Oppression:** This factsheet examines the seemingly paradoxical problem that despite decreasing levels of overt bigotry and prejudice, oppression and inequality remain enduring features of US society. In this factsheet we examine the concept of oppression, provide a brief snapshot of contemporary inequality in the US., introduce the concept of privilege, and provide a theoretical model for understanding the matrix of privilege and oppression. Finally, we examine some of the common forms of resistance to advancing social equity and justice, and provide suggestions for individuals to begin to work for social change.

Oppression is the systematic devaluing, undermining, marginalizing, and disadvantaging of certain social identity groups in contrast to a privileged norm. Oppression exists when some people are denied something of value (such as access to resources, opportunities, and networks; legal protections and rights; inclusion and acceptance, etc.) based on their social group memberships. Key to an understanding of oppression is recognizing that it is based on membership in socially constructed subordinate identity categories; it is *not* based on individual characteristics. Sociologists have long focused on inequality based on class, race, and gender. In recent decades, significant research has examined inequity facing LGBT people, and we are now seeing growing bodies of literature examining religion, ability, and age.

Marilyn Frye (2003) describes oppression as a birdcage: an interlocking network of institutional barriers that prevents escape. While any individual may experience isolated instances of discrimination or prejudice, oppression refers to this mutually reinforcing system of barriers. Joe Feagin, whose work examines racism in the U.S., emphasizes its systemic nature: “Systemic here means that the core racist realities are manifested in each of society’s major parts...[with] a centuries-old foundation” (2001, p. 6). Sociologists have documented historical and ongoing inequality in every major social institution, including education, employment, government, healthcare, family, criminal justice, sport and leisure, etc.

**A Snapshot of Contemporary Inequality:**

- Between 1984 and 2007, the wealth gap between whites and African Americans more than quadrupled, from \$20,000 to \$95,000. <http://contexts.org/socimages/2010/06/08/the-growing-wealth-gap-between-blacks-and-whites-2/>
- In 2007, 86% of LGBT middle and high school students report experiencing harassment at school in the past year, 61% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 33% skipped a day of school in the past month due to safety concerns. <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2340.html?state=research&type=research>
- While 1 in 100 U.S. adults are behind bars, in 2007, the number was 1 in 36 for adult Hispanic men and 1 in 15 for adult black men. <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/One%20in%20100.pdf>
- The percentage of high-poverty schools (at least ¾ of students are on free or reduced fee lunch) increased from 12% to 17% in the past decade. Children at these schools receive a lower quality education, their teachers have less education, and they face decreasing chances for graduating (U.S. Dept of Education).
- In 2008, 39.8 million people were living in poverty, up from 37.3 million in 2007. The numbers vary by race (whites: 8.6%; Asian Americans: 11.8%; Hispanics: 23.2%; and blacks: 24.7%). <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/incpovhlth/2008/highlights.html>
- Women-owned businesses are underrepresented in government contracts in 87% of all industries (U.S. Women’s Chamber of Commerce 2007).
- In 2009, for full-time employees, women’s weekly earnings were 80% of men’s; African-American women earned 69% of white men, and Latina women only 60% (Institute for Women’s Policy Research).
- More than half of all women with disabilities experience sexual or physical abuse in their lifetime (SWS factsheet “Violence Against Women”). <http://www.socwomen.org/index.php?ss=25>
- 16.7 percent of hate crimes are based on religious intolerance. Of those, in 2004, 67.8 percent were perpetrated against Jews, and 12.7 percent targeted Muslims. [http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius\\_04/offenses\\_reported/hate\\_crime/index.html](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/offenses_reported/hate_crime/index.html)

**Seeing Privilege:** Historically, most research on inequality has focused on oppression, ignoring the other half of the picture, privilege. Privilege confers power, dominance, resources and rewards. Because they exist in relation to each other, oppression and privilege operate hand in hand; one cannot exist without the other. Privilege is derived from one’s group membership, or social location. It is not the result of anything that one has done as an individual.

Peggy McIntosh's (1988) "White Privilege and Male Privilege" offers a long list of examples of white privilege she experiences. She noted, for example, that white privilege includes being able to assume that most of the people you or your children study in school will be of the same race; being able to go shopping without being followed; never being called a credit to one's race, or having to represent one's entire race; as well as simple details like finding flesh colored bandages to match one's skin color. These examples highlight the unearned nature of privilege.

People of privilege often do not realize the extent to which inequality is still pervasive. Looking at life from their own narrow experience, they fail to recognize that their experiences are not universal nor simply the result of their own hard work, but instead the result of their privileged status. For example, many white people believe that discrimination has been outlawed and equality has been achieved (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Pincus, 2003; Steinberg, 2001). Central to this assumption is the belief in a color-blind society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Collins, 2004). This approach argues that we should simply treat people as human beings, rather than as racialized beings. While many people naively embrace this view as non-racist, by ignoring the extent to which race still shapes people's life chances and opportunities, even life span, color-blindness actually reinforces and reproduces contemporary racial inequality. The reality of inequality today is subtle and institutional, rather than the overt gestures and legal discrimination of the past. Sociologists call this "the new racism." (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Collins, 2004).

Despite entrenched gender inequality, we also see the rise of a new discourse around gender, remarkably similar to color-blind racism. This ideology assumes that the law and society are now "gender-blind" in their treatment of men and women. It assumes that the women's movement has accomplished its goals, and barriers facing women have been removed (Ferber, 2003, 2007; Faludi, 2006; McRobbie, 2009). This perspective ignores the reality of continued gender inequality, and also ignores some of the real differences in men and women's needs, including the need for pre-natal health care, lactation rooms, etc.

Contemporary ideologies of racism and sexism are part of a broad discourse on inequality that we call "oppression-blindness" (Ferber, 2007). Oppression-blind perspectives start with the assumption that the U.S. has created a level playing field for all, and thus, any inequality today is the result of individual or cultural differences and failures. Oppression-blind ideology informs other systems of inequality as well. For example:

- **Classism:** The media promotes the myth of the U.S. as a "classless" society, despite growing class inequality (Kendall, 2009; Mantsios, 2003). In 1978, corporate CEOs in the U.S. earned, on average, 35 times more than the average worker. Today, they earn 320 times more than the average worker ([www.edchange.com/handouts/coporatization.pdf](http://www.edchange.com/handouts/coporatization.pdf)). Further, as of 2007, the top 20% of households owned 85% of the country's non-government wealth; the remaining 15% of the wealth was held by the bottom 80% of the population (Domhoff, 2010).
- **Heterosexism:** Scholars studying LGBT inequality have found that efforts to gain equal rights under the law have faced a backlash that has attempted to rearticulate their goal as seeking "special rights." This claim can only be made if one starts with the assumption that gay and lesbian citizens already share the same rights as heterosexuals (Dudas, 2005; Stein, 2002). We know this is not the case, however. LGBT people face inequality in schools, religious institutions, healthcare, the workplace, and families, and lack many of the legal rights granted to heterosexuals through the institution of marriage (Herdt and Howe, 2007; Udis-Kessler, 2008).
- **Ableism:** According to Clare (2009), our dominant frameworks "all turn disability into problems faced by individual people." In response, "disability activists fiercely declare that it is not our bodies that need curing. Rather it is ableism—disability oppression, as reflected in high unemployment rates, lack of access, gawking, substandard education, being forced to live in nursing homes and back rooms, being childlike and asexual—that needs changing" (p. 604).

The enduring myth of America as a meritocracy makes it exceedingly difficult for us to see inequality as institutionalized. Each one of these systems of injustice are maintained by an oppression-blind belief system that ignores the reality of inequality based on social groups memberships and sees the U.S. as the land of equal opportunity where anyone who tries hard enough can succeed. Social problems are thus reduced to individual problems.

**The Matrix of Oppression and Privilege:** Understanding how systems of difference and inequality interact and operate to shape everyone's lives is essential to the struggle for social justice. We all have multiple social group identities that define who we are and how others view us. Based on one's social location, a person can be oppressed in some ways and privileged in others. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) refers to this as a matrix of domination. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. are mutually reinforcing systems that intersect in shaping our lives.

### Key Characteristics of the Matrix of Oppression and Privilege:

- **Classifications of difference are socially constructed:** recognizes that race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, etc. are socially constructed classification systems. Social constructs vary cross-culturally and historically and biology and culture interact (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Ferber, Holcomb & Wentling, 2008)
- **Privilege and oppression go hand in hand:** privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. When we bring privilege into the picture, we see that everyone has a racial identity, a gender identity, etc. White people have a race, and men have a gender and these affect their life experiences and opportunities.
- **Inequality is harmful to all:** narrow group identities can be harmful to everyone, even those in the privileged group. For example, boys experience many negative effects from our culture's narrow definition of masculinity which contributes to adolescent boys' bullying (Kimmel, 2008).
- **Intersectional:** emphasizes that forms of privilege and oppression interact and intersect, so it emphasizes diversity within groups. For example, no one has just a racial identity. This approach emphasizes that rather than seeing African Americans as a homogenous group, the experiences of African Americans vary depending upon other important social classification such as gender, class and sexual orientation (Collins, 2004).
- **Inequality is an institutional problem:** privilege and oppression are not characteristics of people, but of society. According to Allan Johnson (2006), "Oppression and dominance name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating people" (p. 13). Thus, we can understand how even the best-intentioned individuals may unknowingly contribute to reinforcing inequality.
- **We are all responsible for social change:** We are all implicated in systems of inequality, and must accept responsibility for working for change. Racism is not a people of color problem; sexism should not be seen as a women's issue. We must all work together as allies to create social change (Ferber, Jimenez, O'Reilly Herrera and Samuels, 2008).

**Resistance to Acknowledging One's Privilege:** It is no wonder that individuals, especially those who are most privileged, often resist acknowledging the reality of ongoing inequality. We are immersed in a culture where the ideology of oppression-blindness is pervasive. The ubiquitous social institution of mass media bombards us with "depictions of race relations that suggest that discriminatory racial barriers have been dismantled" (Gallagher 2009, p. 548). However, it is clear that these institutionalized barriers still exist. For example, most history textbooks today revolve around white male history and do not adequately address racism (Brown & Brown, 2010). According to Gary Howard (2006): "[Whites] have been able to determine the structure and content of schooling and in this way have institutionalized our ignorance in the name of education" (p. 63).

Individuals often experience some cognitive dissonance, then, when they start to learn that the values they had previously been taught as truth are in fact ideologies. Mezirow (1994) calls this experience a *disorienting dilemma*. Coming face to face with one's privilege may produce a flood of emotion, including anger, guilt, shame and sadness (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Allen, 2004; Goodman, 2001; Johnson, 2006; Samuels, 2009). Social Identity Development Models have been advanced to explain the process individuals follow as they engage conflicting analyses of their own and others' social identities, and grapple with the reality of inequality (Cross 1978; Hardiman and Jackson 1997; Helms 1984; McAllister 2000). Some of the **common responses** to learning about privilege include:

- **"I don't feel privileged, my life is hard too!"** This is an example of minimizing or denying privilege (Johnson, 2006). We often focus on oppressed identities as a means of ignoring our privilege.
- **"My family didn't own slaves!"** This is a way to excuse oneself, but as historians have documented, "Into the mid-nineteenth century, the majority of whites-- in the elites and among ordinary folk-- either participated directly in slavery or in trade around slavery, or did not object to those who did" (Feagin, 2001, p. 15). The economies of many Northern cities were based almost entirely on the slave trade (see *Traces of the Trade*); and generations of whites have reaped "undeserved enrichment" from the forced labor of slaves, the cheap labor of other minority group members, and the land and resources taken, often violently, from Native Americans and Mexicans. These practices contribute directly to today's tremendous racial wealth gap.
- **"I treat everyone the same!"** This type of response shifts the focus to prejudiced and bigoted individuals and allows us to ignore systemic oppression and privilege.
- **"Anyone could succeed if they would just try harder!"** This adherence to the myth of meritocracy attributes the failures of an individual solely to that individual without taking into account systemic inequalities that create an unfair system. It is a form of blaming the victim (Johnson, 2006).
- **"We need to move on! If we would just stop talking about it, it wouldn't be such a big problem!"** Systemic inequalities exist and ignoring them will not make them go away. As Justice Blackmun stated in his Supreme

Court decision in *University of California v. Bakke* (1978) more than thirty years ago, “In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way” (para. 14).

- “**Stop being so sensitive! I didn’t mean it.**” Speaking in a derogatory manner about a person or group of people based on social group memberships can, cumulatively, have a devastating impact (Sue, 2010). Disconnecting our own language or action is another form of resistance because it minimizes the indiscretion and sends the message that anyone who challenges the language or behavior is simply being overly sensitive.
- “**I am just one person, I can’t change anything!**” Seeing oneself as incapable of creating change is a means of excusing oneself from accepting any responsibility. Individuals often conceive of social inequalities as too large to tackle, and thus rationalize their lack of action.

**Taking Action:** Systems of oppression and privilege are interacting and mutually constitutive and reinforcing; we cannot oppose only one system of inequality and meet with any success. We must work to undermine all forms of inequality simultaneously.

Individuals cannot “opt out” of systems of privilege; rather these systems are deeply interwoven into society. Systems, however, are made up of people. While oppression is systemic, it is reproduced by each one of us on a daily basis. We have the choice of whether or not to acknowledge privilege as it operates in our lives and to use our privilege as a means of creating social change. This requires that we “begin with personal investigation...if we are going to take a stand, we need to feel prepared to deal with our own sense of discomfort and potential resistance or rejection from others” (Tochluk 2008, pp. 249-250). Anyone who experiences privilege has the potential to be an ally (Ayvazian, 1995; Kendall 2006).

### **Become an Ally:**

- Take responsibility for learning about how oppression and privilege work, and teach others. Do not expect others to teach you.
- Seek community: there are many websites, organizations, and social movements out there working for social justice that you can join.
- Assume that inequality and oppression are everywhere, all the time, even when not visible to you.
- Work continuously to be aware of your own privilege and the way privilege operates. Notice who the center of attention is, who has access to power, and whose voices are missing.
- Notice the ways in which oppression and privilege are denied, ignored, minimized, or justified.
- Learn from history: from both the history of specific forms of inequality as well as from social movements that have worked for change and social justice.
- Speak out! Take a stand against injustice. Take risks and be willing to act in spite of your own fear and the resistance you face from others.
- Recognize that learning to see oppression and privilege is an ongoing, lifelong process.
- Recognize that you will make mistakes, and approach them as learning opportunities. It is okay to be uncomfortable; it is a sign that you are learning!
- Listen to, respect, and support the leadership, perspectives, and experiences of members of oppressed groups.
- Mobilize and organize to respond to inequality without being prompted by members of oppressed groups.

(Some items adapted from Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Kivel, 2002; Wong (n.d.)).

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#### **Recommended Organizations and Websites:**

- **The White Privilege Conference:** an interdisciplinary and intersectional conference consisting of institutes and workshops examining privilege and oppression, dvds available. [www.uccs.edu/wpc](http://www.uccs.edu/wpc)
- **Southern Poverty Law Center and Teaching Tolerance:** Many free resources and curriculum for addressing a wide range of diversity issues at all educational levels. [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)
- [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com): website of educator and activist Paul Kivel, with many activities and curricular sessions
- [www.edchange.org](http://www.edchange.org): website started by educator and activist Paul Gorski, with many activities and curricular sessions, with links to the Multicultural Pavilion.
- **Media Education Foundation:** produced many excellent films for high school age students and above [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)