

## **1. Social Justice**

Social justice is both a process and a goal.

The goal of social justice is the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. A socially just society is one in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and society as a whole.

The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change. Domination cannot be ended through coercive tactics; but through a "power-with" rather than power-over paradigm for enacting social justice goals. However, developing a social justice process in a society steeped in oppression is not easy. For this reason, a clear way to define and analyze oppression is needed to understand how it operates in personal, cultural, and societal ways - or a theory of oppression.

## **2. Systemic Oppression Theory (also called Critical Social Theory)**

Within this widely-accepted theory of oppression, the basis of oppression is difference. Not the fact or reality of difference, but how people respond to difference.

Society is characterized by immense variation, across such social categories as class, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, culture, language, and impairment - and within them as well. Oppression is the exploitation of at least one of those social categories by the dominant social group. The dominant social group exploits difference to maintain and solidify its privileged position in society. The dominant social group also denies that different levels of power and oppression exist under their way of organizing society, especially the different groups that are part of society.

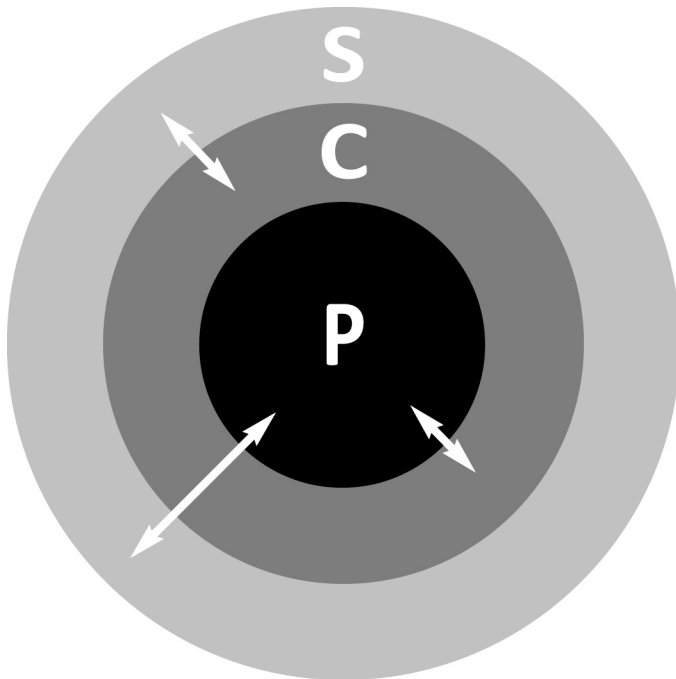
For example, European colonialists kidnapped, raped, tortured, enslaved, murdered, and otherwise imposed a genocide on Africans through what was called the "slave trade". Europeans justified their ability to trade other human beings based on the exploitation of difference between white skin and black skin - on their belief that white skin was superior. This belief was not an individual one, however, but a social one: The science of that time used medical testing and terminology to assert that Africans were biologically inferior to Europeans. This science put forward ideas that Africans were more animal than human; that Africans had smaller brains and therefore limited cognition; that Africans could not feel pain; and so on. This science enabled Europeans to treat Africans as objects, rather than as human beings. This science was "proven" and therefore unchallengeable. It is this social sanctioning, through "science" that we now know was totally incorrect, that enabled the system of human trafficking called the "slave trade" to be regulated by European governments, who developed laws and policies that oversaw it - even though the economic system of "trade" at the time typically occurred in commodities, not other human beings (except for women, where laws in many nations enable men to sell and buy women as part of their "chattel", or personal possessions). Yet, most of what occurred under this economic system of "trade" would today be called "crimes against humanity".

Clearly, the western belief that black people are inferior to white people dominated not only individual or personal human interaction, it also dominated social institutions, like economic systems of trade. Sadly, this belief that black people are inferior to white people was not challenged in western society until the civil rights movement in the 1960s - 300 years later. Even today, although segregation laws have been abolished, racism is still rampant.

Oppression is always based on an exploitation of difference (e.g. White is better than Black). And it is rooted in society as the exercise of social power by a dominant group over different populations. This social power most often remains unintentional and invisible. But, if we view oppression in terms of difference rather than individual behavior, we can identify more clearly how it operates in society. Once we understand how oppression operates, we can enact processes of emancipation that will enable us to genuinely affect social justice.

### **3. Circles of Oppression in Western Society**

In society, oppression operates on three levels at all times: On a personal level ("P"), on a cultural level ("C"), AND on a structural level ("S"). The most power in society exists on the structural level. Yet, we are personally at the centre of it all.



Oppression at the personal level ("P") comprises the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that depict a negative (pre)judgment of a particular subordinate social group. It is usually based on stereotypes and may be overt or covert. For example, a white woman might automatically, without even think about it, cross the street to avoid possible interaction with a group of homeless men on the street corner. Or a rich person might think that the only reason a person is on welfare is because he is too lazy to work.

Oppression at the cultural level ("C") consists of the values, norms, and shared patterns of seeing, thinking, and acting, along with an assumed consensus about what is right and normal,

that taken together endorse the belief in a superior culture. It refers to the ways and discursive practices used by the dominant group to portray subordinate groups in history - literature, the media, stories, movies, humor, stereotypes, and especially mass or popular culture. It acts as a vehicle for transmitting and presenting the dominant culture as the norm, the message being that everyone should conform to it. Ultimately, it can lead to ethnocentrism and cultural imposition - that is, to a narrow view of the world only from within the narrow confines of one culture. It is the cement of cultural oppression that reinforces personal and structural oppression. For example, popular culture - especially through the media - transmits the idea that all women should strive to conform to the same body image: White, overly thin, with little to no body hair, and over-sexualized.

Oppression at the structural level ("S") refers to the means by which oppression is institutionalized in society through what is called "mitigating social structures: e.g. Religion, government, education, law, the media, and the health care system. Structural oppression consists of the ways that social institutions, laws, policies, social processes and practices, and the economic and political systems all work together primarily in favor of the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups. At this level, oppression is often given its formal sanctioning through government, education, law, religion the media, and other social structures. For example, in western society, many government, statutory (paid) work holidays conform to the Christian calendar (Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday), but do not honor any other religious days, like Yom Kippur or Eid.

It is important to remember that oppression occurs in society on all three levels at all times when working for social justice. Just because an individual may lack thoughts, attitudes, or beliefs that are oppressive, doesn't mean that she is free from oppression in her life. She can still contribute to it - unintentionally - because of the ways oppression is manifest culturally and socially.

In fact, most social justice actors accept that fact that all human beings are oppressive and all enjoy privilege, depending on their circumstances. It is the acceptance of this world order that allows us to analyze its impact and work toward a more socially just world.

#### **4. Oppression and Privilege in Western Society**

According to Systemic Oppression Theory, all people take on one of two roles when engaging with other people in society, privileged or oppressed: (a) Oppressed people are those members of social groups that exploited because of their difference. These social groups are subordinate in society. (b) Privileged people are those members of social groups who gain power, whether or not they want it, because their difference is perceived as more desirable and therefore legitimized or sanctioned by society in cultural and structural ways. These social groups are dominant in society.

Within a social justice framework, it is essential to understand that - by far - the majority of human beings will find themselves within both oppressed and privileged groups in certain interpersonal circumstances. For example, a poor girl is very intelligent and would like a university education. She cannot afford tuition, but gets scholarships based on her academic performance. These scholarships enable her to complete university and get a very high-paying job when she graduates. Early in her life, she was poor - part of a "lower" class in society, making her part of an oppressed group.

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But later in her life, she became a middle class person, giving her more privilege in society - even though she may still have the same personal attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs as when she was poor. It is her shift from one social category to another, not merely her personal or individual behavior, that changes her role from oppressed to privileged.

Stated in simplified terms, the difference between privileged groups and oppressed groups in society is broken down thusly:

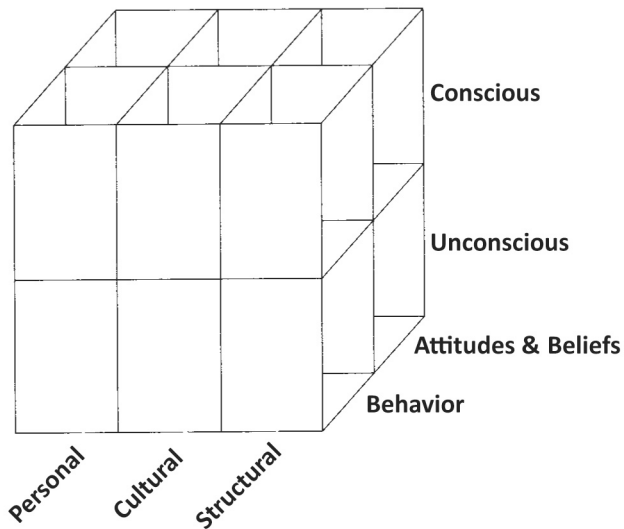
<b>Social Group</b>	<b>Privileged</b>	<b>Oppressed</b>
Gender	Male	Female, Intersexed, Transgendered Gender Queer
Age	Adults (18 - 64)	Children and Elders
Ability	People without impairment	People with impairment
Religion	Christianity	Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Baha'i, Paganism, Taoism, Atheisms, Rastafari, Sikhism, Judaism, Zoroastrian, etc.
Ethnicity	European	People of Color
Social class	Middle and Upper Class	Poor and Working Class
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirited, Queer, Questioning
Indigenous Culture	Non-Aboriginal	First Nation, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, Aboriginal
National Origin	North American born	Immigrant or Refugee
(first) Language	English	Other than English

### 5. The Oppression Matrix

The Oppression Matrix highlights the complex ways that oppression is manifest in society on personal, cultural, and structural ways. It also highlights the complexity that is added to this through conscious and unconscious attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that perpetuate oppression.

It is on a personal level that many of us claim we do “not oppress” others. It is on this individual level where many of us lack the biased attitudes and behaviors that are involved in oppression. However, on institutional and societal levels, many of us belong to community groups that hold - willingly or unwillingly - unconscious attitudes and behaviors that are oppressive to others. Effective social justice actors strive to make their unconscious privilege conscious.

The Oppression Matrix... what effective social justice agents analyze in every social context:



## 6. The Triangle of Oppression

The Triangle of Oppression enables us to examine our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors within a social context, rather than as merely individuals. Those people who do examine their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in this context are referred to as "allies" in social justice processes.

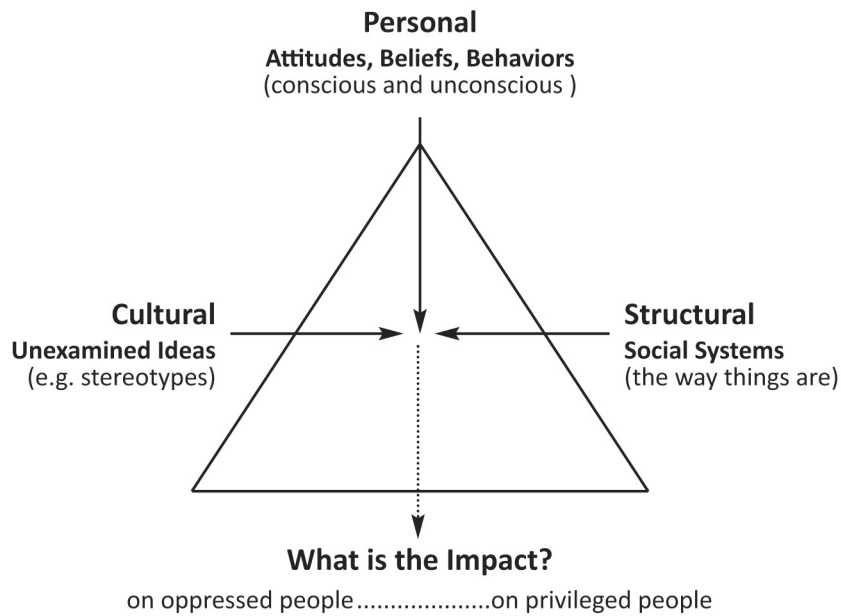
Anne Bishop, a Canadian educator and social justice activist, defines allies as people who:

- are personally, culturally, and structurally aware;
- are connected with all other people rather than with only their own social groups, and not only in a professional or service capacity;
- have a critical analysis of social structures;
- possess a collective orientation as opposed to one that is individualistic;
- have an acceptance of struggle and a sense of process;
- have an understanding of power with as opposed to power over; and
- have a high degree of self-understanding, a knowledge of history, and an understanding that good intentions do not matter if there is no action against oppression.

As allies to social justice, we are dealing with complex personal interaction that is shaped consciously and unconsciously by cultural norms and structural systems. The Triangle of Oppression gives us a way to begin engaging ourselves in a social justice processes.

The Triangle of Oppression enables us to think more critically about the powerful ideas about difference that exist in society, and that are used to exploit those differences within the systems of society.

The Triangle of Oppression:



Use the Triangle of Oppression to analyze social injustice so that you can make a more informed choice about what to do about it. In social justice, we are all part of the problem and we are all part of the solution - by committing to the life-long process of becoming effective allies.