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## THE FOUR "I's" OF OPPRESSION

### **Ideological Oppression**

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, normal, 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, abnormal, inferior, and so on.

### **Institutional Oppression**

The idea that one group is better than another group 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 and schools, hiring policies, public policies, housing development, media images, political power, etc. When a woman makes two thirds of what a man makes in the same job, it is institutionalized sexism. When one out of every four African-American young men is currently in jail, on parole, or on probation, it is institutionalized racism. When psychiatric institutions and associations "diagnose" transgender people as having a mental disorder, it is institutionalized gender oppression and transphobia. Institutional oppression does not have to be intentional. For example, if a policy unintentionally reinforces and creates new inequalities between privileged and non-privileged groups, it is considered institutional oppression.

### **Interpersonal Oppression**

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally disrespect or mistreat individuals in the 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, etc. Similarly, interpersonal sexism is what men do to women--the sexual abuse and harassment, the violence directed at women, the belittling or ignoring of women's thinking, the sexist jokes, etc.

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

**No "reverse racism".** These kinds of oppressive attitudes and behaviors are backed up by the institutional arrangements. This helps to clarify the confusion around what some claim to be "reverse racism". 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. 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 not have happened if King had been white and the officers black.

A simple definition of racism, as a system, is: **RACISM = PREJUDICE + POWER.**

Therefore, with this definition of the systemic nature of racism, people of color cannot be racist. The same formula holds true for all forms of oppression. The dominant group has its mistreatment of the target group embedded in and backed up by society's institutions and other forms of power.

### **Internalized Oppression**

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 disrespect *interpersonally* from members of the dominant group, and they eventually come to *internalize* the negative messages about themselves. If we have been told we are stupid, worthless, abnormal and have been treated as if we were all our lives, then it is not surprising that we would come to believe it. This makes us feel bad.

Oppression always begins from *outside* 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. Thus, people in any target group have to struggle hard to keep from feeling heavy feelings of powerlessness or despair. They often tend to put themselves and others down, in ways that mirror the oppressive messages they have gotten all their lives. Acting out internalized oppression runs the gamut from passive powerlessness to violent aggression. It is important to understand that some of the internalized patterns of behavior originally developed to keep people alive--they had real survival value.

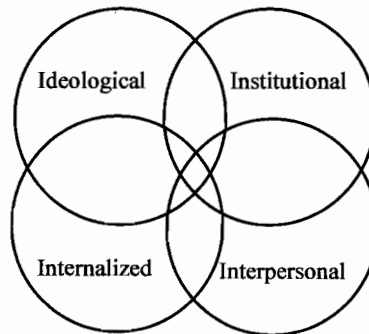
On the way to eliminating institutional oppression, each oppressed group has to undo the internalized beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that stem from the oppression so that it can build unity among people in its group, support its leaders, feel proud of its history, contributions, and potential, develop the strength to challenge patterns that hold the group back, and organize itself into an effective force for social change.

### **Internalized Privilege**

*Likewise, people who benefit the most from these systems internalize privilege.* Privileged people involuntarily accept stereotypes and false assumptions about oppressed groups made by dominant culture. Internalized privilege includes acceptance of a belief in the inherent inferiority of the oppressed group as well as the inherent superiority or normalcy of one's own privileged group. Internalized privilege creates an unearned sense of entitlement in members of the privileged group, and can be expressed as a denial of the existence of oppression and as paternalism.

## The Four "I's" As An Interrelated System

It should be clear that none of these four aspects of oppression can exist separately. As the diagram below suggests, each is completely mixed up with the others. It is crucial to see any oppression as a system. It should also be clear that trying to challenge oppression in any of the four aspects will affect the other three.



## WHAT IS AN ALLY?

An ally is a member of a dominant group who rejects the dominant ideology and takes action against oppression out of a belief that eliminating oppression benefits everyone. But that is only a small part of the rich and diverse contribution that allies offer. An ally is a person who takes a stand against social injustice directed at target groups.

These include:

- men who speak out against sexism
- white people who speak out against racism
- heterosexual people who speak out against heterosexism and homophobia

An ally works to be an agent of social change rather than an agent of oppression. They are confident in their own social group membership, and comfortable and proud of their own identity. They take responsibility for learning how oppression works in everyday life, and listen to and respect the perspectives of those who are oppressed.

Allies acknowledge unearned privilege and status, and work to eliminate or change privileges into rights that all people enjoy. Allies recognize that unlearning oppressive beliefs and actions are a lifelong process, not a single event, and they welcome opportunities to learn.

Allies are willing to take risks and try new behaviors. Some allies may experience fears of their own as well as resistance from other people, but they are willing to take risks despite these obstacles. Allies act against social injustice because they believe in righting wrongs and in making the world a better place for all. They are comfortable making a connection between themselves and every other person, and they know that in other circumstances or spheres they might be (and perhaps are) among the oppressed or vilified themselves. They are willing to make mistakes and learn from them; when they are unsure of something, they are willing to ask questions and respect the answers of those whose rights they support. They are willing to be challenged and confronted about their own behavior and attitudes, and they are wholly committed to taking action against social injustice in their own personal spheres of influence, as well as in broader spheres -- social, political, or professional -- whenever the opportunity arises.

Allies understand the connections among all forms of social injustice, and believe they can make a difference by acting and speaking out against them in their daily lives. Allies also work to cultivate support from other potential allies, and take care of themselves to avoid burnout.

Adapted from "Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice" edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin (Routledge Press, 1997).

## AN ALLY...

- 1) Doesn't deny her/his privilege: uses it to challenge institutionalized oppression and internalized superiority
- 2) Acknowledges her/his own internalized superiority and challenges it daily, no matter how uncomfortable it feels
- 3) Doesn't assume s/he's earned the trust of an oppressed person or group; or that s/he has the right to speak for an oppressed person
- 4) Knows that her/his effectiveness as an ally is measured in part by the quality of the relationship s/he shares with oppressed persons/organizations
- 5) Listens to and respects the experience of the oppressed person or group
- 6) Knows that there are new layers of knowledge and understanding to be gained by listening to an oppressed person
- 7) Doesn't let fear of making a mistake silence her/him
- 8) Understands that it is never too late to be an ally
- 9) Understands that past or present activism doesn't prevent even the best-intentioned person from internalizing many of America's racist assumptions/myths
- 10) Understands that past or present activism doesn't excuse even the best-intentioned person from doing the hard work of identifying and rooting out less obvious, but more long lasting forms of institutional oppressions.

## AN ALLY ORGANIZATION...

- 1) Invites people without a voice to speak
- 2) Makes it safe for those most affected by policies to participate
- 3) Acknowledges the risks people take or feel when they speak the truth
- 4) Sets up decision-making processes that give real power to those most directly affected by the decisions
- 5) Is aware of existing organizational structures, and of what people need to be able to maneuver through them
- 6) Acknowledges that societal oppression and a person's position in an organization affect how secure s/he feels and how s/he is *able or encouraged* to take leadership within the organization
- 7) Continues to explore, grow, and learn from the experiences of others in order to create a more inclusive, open space
- 8) Examines the practices and policies of the organization, and creates a space where employees can be truly safe to give feedback
- 9) Considers the negative impact that a policy of "evenhandedness" might have on oppressed people
- 10) Works to employ oppressed people in **key** positions in all areas of the organization (not only administrative support positions)
- 11) Works to attract and maintain a significant number of oppressed people on its board of directors, and makes sure that their opinions, skills and talents are respected and utilized (**not** limited to matters of their oppression)
- 12) Develops and maintains authentic relationships with individuals and organizations of oppressed people
- 13) Doesn't approach an oppressed person or organization of oppressed people for a favor, endorsement or patronage without having first developed a relationship of trust with that person or organization.

## Qualities Of An Anti-Racist Ally

- ❖ Does something daily to earn the title of 'ally.' Recognizes that their "white ally badge" expires at the end of the day and must be renewed by a person of color.
- ❖ Title is not self-identified by white people but identified by people of color
- ❖ Understands that one person of color's white ally is not automatically another person of color's ally.
- ❖ Identifies and names racism directly.
- ❖ Takes the front line as a buffer; not as a 'savior.'
- ❖ Recognizes that remaining silent, "neutral" or "objective" can be a form of race privilege.
- ❖ Takes responsibility for self-education and doesn't expect POC to teach them.
- ❖ Cultivates genuine relationships with people of color that are mutually beneficial.
- ❖ Is hyper-vigilant about interrupting racism, but is not hyper-arrogant about being a "white ally."
- ❖ Struggles every day with understanding and undoing aspects of their own privilege.
- ❖ Works regularly to develop a deeper understanding of ongoing colonial relationships.
- ❖ Understands that people of color's experiences of racism is not debatable.
- ❖ Doesn't require people of color to display proof of racist injury.
- ❖ Knows that people of color are the experts of their own experiences.
- ❖ Acts in solidarity with people of color without taking over their liberation efforts.
- ❖ Doesn't expect gratitude from people of color, or to be recognized as a white ally.
- ❖ Takes on racism as a problem because it is *personally* offensive.
- ❖ Is motivated by a quest for justice, rather than a sense of guilt.
- ❖ Open to, and invites challenge. Expects support and accountability from other emerging allies.
- ❖ Unconditionally opposes oppression with no strings attached.
- ❖ Accepts that making mistakes is part of becoming an effective ally.
- ❖ Acknowledges, apologizes for, and learns from own mistakes without retreating.
- ❖ Interrupts racist statements or behaviors whether or not a person of color is present or objects.
- ❖ Participates respectfully in communities of color and avoids "cultural tourism."
- ❖ Is committed to social justice and an end to oppression in all its forms.

## **“Etiquette With People With Disabilities” (Olkin, 1999)**

### **A. Ten General Rules**

1. Don't stare.
2. Don't talk about all the people with disabilities you know.
3. Don't assume the person needs help, and don't begin helping without asking.
4. Be clear about who you are talking with (e.g., don't look at an interpreter when speaking to a deaf person).
5. Don't be afraid to say you don't understand one's words or their meaning.
6. Don't worry about using words that seem counter to the disability (e.g., “do you see what I mean?” to a person who is blind).
7. Don't touch someone's assistive device without permission.
8. Know that nonverbal cues are often altered by disability.
9. Think about the temperature in your office. Many people with disabilities are sensitive to heat (e.g., MS) or cold (e.g., arthritis).
10. Don't take these rules too seriously!

### **B. Wheelchairs and Scooters**

- Make your office and anyplace you refer to is accessible. Don't assume the person will stay in her or his wheelchair or scooter; s/he may prefer to transfer to another chair.
- Never push someone's wheelchair unless requested or unless there is a danger of it tipping.
- Don't carry or lift someone.

### **C. Speech and Communication Difficulties**

- Match listening to speech (e.g., slow).
- Don't complete sentences or supply words if someone is having difficulty.

### **D. Visual Impairments**

- Tell someone what materials you have available, and offer them in an alternate format if possible.
- Convey information about your building and offer a guided tour.
- Offer your arm and lead, but don't take someone's arm or push from behind.

### **E. Deafness or Hearing Impairments**

- Don't assume someone has lip-reading skills.
- Many Deaf people prefer face to face interaction, even re: minor issues.
- Recognize that many who use sign language use lots of expression and movement; don't interpret as “weird”.
- Sign language is a blunt language—don't be put off by a Deaf person's bluntness.



## Privileges Held by Straight People

- 1) I don't have to worry about experiencing violence from a stranger, co-worker, fellow student, or acquaintance because they found out I was, or perceived me to be, heterosexual.
- 2) If I turn on the TV, the radio, or see a movie, I can expect to see or hear about relationships like mine.
- 3) I can show affection to my partner in public without having to evaluate my surroundings and determine if it is safe for me to do so.
- 4) If I choose to display my partner's photo at work or mention my partner casually in conversation, I don't have to worry about losing my job.
- 5) I am not asked problematic questions like "whose the man in the relationship?" or "can I watch?"
- 6) Neither my outward gender presentation (i.e. clothes, hair, body language, etc) nor my public displays of affection are seen as me "flaunting my sexuality" or "shoving it down peoples' throats."
- 7) If I fail to mention to someone that I am heterosexual, I won't be labeled as deceitful, closeted, or ashamed of who I am.
- 8) When people make assumptions about my sexual orientation, they generally will be correct.
- 9) I am not told by religious institutions, psychiatric institutions, my family, or the media, that my relationships are sinful and/or unhealthy. I am not constantly bombarded by negative messages about people of my sexual orientation, nor is my sexuality ever exoticized or seen as trendy.
- 10) I am not told that my sexuality is a phase. If I identify as straight at a young age, I won't be told that I need to have sex with somebody before I truly know that I am heterosexual.
- 11) If my partner becomes violent or abusive, I don't have to worry about people around me blaming it on my sexual orientation.
- 12) I never have to answer the question or even think about what caused my heterosexuality.
- 13) I don't have to seek out specific community spaces where it is safe to be heterosexual. I can expect to be safe as a heterosexual everywhere I go.

(over)



- 14) Violence against me and other people who share my sexual orientation is not condoned by society.
- 15) I don't have to worry about losing custody of my children because of my sexual orientation. Whether or not my children are biologically related to me, I can have both myself and my partner on the adoption certificate. I cannot be denied parental rights because of my partner's gender.
- 16) If I move into a new neighborhood, I will not be ostracized or treated badly because of my sexual orientation.
- 17) If I become ill, my sickness will not be attributed to or assumed to be caused by, my sexual orientation.
- 18) I do not have to worry about losing emotional or financial support from my family because of my sexual orientation.
- 19) If I am ever the victim of sexual violence, my sexual orientation will not be seen as the cause of the violence I experienced. Similarly, the violence will not be seen as the cause of my heterosexuality.
- 20) Despite the fact that most child molesters are people of my sexual orientation, people do not assume that I am one when they hear that I am heterosexual.
- 21) When accessing healthcare, particularly reproductive healthcare, I do not have to worry about mistreatment or discrimination when having to answer personal questions about my sexual behavior.
- 22) I can choose to have my relationship acknowledged by my community, my government, and my faith community. I can access literally thousands of rights and legal protections based solely on my sexual orientation.
- 23) If I am serving in the military, I do not have to fear violence from others in my unit nor discharge because of my sexual orientation.
- 24) People do not assume I am attracted to every single person of the opposite sex when I tell them I am heterosexual.
- 25) I am not stereotyped as overly sexual, nor am I stereotyped as asexual, when people find out about my sexual orientation.

5.17.11

Nella Mahajan: Chinook Foundation

Ground Rules:

Don't Yuck My Yum

One mic, One Dica

Definitions ~ pairs

4" i" frame of oppression

Internalized Oppression:

curly hair, light skin

read, examples of institutions and ex of institutionalism and examples of ally w — words to undo

T+NT

Racism / classism, sexism + Genderism

NT

White

ind + weath

→

T

POC

poor working

queer, gender nonconforming  
Trans, intersex,

NT

heterosexism

ableism

w/ dis

T

gay + Q

w/ mental or phys

Then do 4" i" for each ISM in sm. groups on paper, go around & add on ea paper, each present

What are connections? What are unique qualities institutions same in holding ISMs in place, overlap of gender/sex and heterosexism, race & class ~~also~~ freq. go together

Internalized

1. What forms of intern. opp. struggle w/

2. What are 3 things you can do  
in next mo. to address + heal  
your I.O.

3. What resources / support do  
you need to do this

Ally

→ Area need  
to develop  
→ as an ally

→