

The Nature of Oppression

There are many people, and groups of people, who experience some form of oppression or other. So, we might ask, What IS oppression? Iris Young claims that there is no unifying principle which describes all cases of oppression, except this vague claim:

“All oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities, and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.”

Oppression has commonly been understood as “the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group” and often carries “a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination” (e.g., slavery, European colonization, etc.). But, that is a very narrow understanding of the term. We have come to understand that oppression need not come in the explicit form of intentional, coercive tyranny—rather, oppression can exist within “the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.” In short, oppression can sometimes (in fact, most often?) be the result of “systemic injustices” or “systemic wrongs”.

Systemic Injustice: When oppression is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices; in other words, when oppression is embedded in certain unquestioned norms, habits, and institutional rules within a society. In this case, injustices to a group of people occur “as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions...”

Oppression, Young says, is really a cluster of concepts. Here are 5 forms of oppression:

- Exploitation
- Marginalization
- Powerlessness
- Cultural Imperialism
- Violence

1. Exploitation: Exploitation occurs when the efforts and energies of the members of one group are primarily directed toward the benefit of the members of another group—and this is exploitative especially in contexts where the group that is benefitted has some power or status that the other does not.

Young discusses exploitation in the context of capitalism, where worker’s labor is converted into a product or service that produces something of greater value (i.e., the profit). These profits go to the owners, shareholders, etc., but not to the workers themselves. Those who profit may then take these profits to gain more workers and therefore even more profits. (The saying, “The rich get richer” may capture this idea.)

Thus, inherently, our system encourages a class division between the rich (owners) and the poor (workers). This is exploitation of the workers by the owners. This might be bad in and of itself. For, it encourages a class division between the “haves” and the “have-nots” (the latter always working to make profits for the former).

But, such divisions are especially oppressive when they cut across other group lines such as race or gender. For instance, in our country there is a very strong tendency for profits, labor, power, etc., to be transferred to white men. For instance, consider the wage gap:

Figure 1: Pay By Gender (and Race) for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers¹

Group	Percentage of White Men’s Pay That Group Earns (2013)
Women	78.3% (steadily increasing from 57% in 1973)*
Black Women	64%
Hispanic Women	54%

**Note: This differs by region. For instance, in New York, women earn 86% of what men do, but in Louisiana, they earn only 66%. Also, the steady increase in women’s wages stalled out in 2001, where this number has been hovering between 76-78% ever since.*

Some possible explanations: (1) Not as many women are getting a college education, so there are fewer educated women entering the work force. (2) Not as many women are seeking high-paying jobs, so this makes their average pay be less than that of men.

Regarding (1), this is false. There are actually MORE women getting college degrees than there are men (for instance, of 27 year olds in the U.S., 32% of women have bachelor’s degrees, while only 24% of men do). About 60% of all Bachelor’s and Master’s Degrees are earned by women, and about 50% of all PhD’s. Furthermore, the wage gap is even WIDER for women with professional degrees (who earn about 67% of what men with professional degrees earn). So, this makes it even MORE remarkable that the average woman’s pay is less than the average man’s pay.

Regarding (2), this is probably true. But, only PART of the wage gap is explained by this fact. Furthermore, this fact begs the question, “But WHY are women seeking/winding up with lower paying jobs than men?”

Is a systemic injustice the cause? Our country is run primarily by white males. (The majority of political leaders, religious leaders, CEO’s, and university professors are white males.) This strong correlation between leadership and being a white male may cause us to unconsciously identify the two. Furthermore, it leaves non-white-males without someone in a leadership role to look up to, aspire to, or learn from, etc. For example:

¹ More details here: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/equal_pay_issue_brief_final.pdf

Servitude/'Transfer of Energies': Stereotypically "women's" jobs are still predominantly filled by women. For instance, 96% of secretaries are still women, and 91% of registered nurses, and 82% of public school teachers are women. Young notes that these professions are geared toward serving others or caring for them. She also notes that "menial" jobs are often given to non-white-males (e.g., bellhops, busboys, janitors, maids, etc.). For instance, while Hispanics only represent 17% of the population, they represent 30-40% of those professions. Young describes these professions as a "transfer of energies" where the labor of the workers is exploited for the profit of the owners, usually for little compensation or recognition (this is one aspect of exploitation).

Top Executives: As of 2017, of the 500 companies that make up the "Fortune 500" only 4 have black CEO's (0.8%). Only 25 have women as CEO's (5%). Click [here](#) for an excellent graph depicting the racial/gender imbalances of the executive world.

Politicians: As of 2017, of 100 U.S. senators, 21 are women (21%)—the highest number in history. 3 senators are black (3%). Of 435 representatives in the House of Representatives, only 83 are women (19.1%). 46 members are black (10.6%).

Keep in mind that African Americans represent only about 13.3% of the U.S. population; but about 50.8% of the population are women.

So, what is going on here? Probably a lot of things. Young suggests that society is structured in such a way as to limit the opportunities of oppressed groups. This may be because others put pressure on them to be a certain way—this pressure can be so great that they may even unconsciously begin to put this pressure on themselves!—which could be perpetuated or strengthened by already pre-existing inequalities (which makes it harder to break out of one's oppressed position), lack of role models (which diminishes awareness or incentive to break out), and so on.

2. Marginalization: Marginalization, Young says, is when "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination."

For instance, the very old, the mentally disabled, or those within the welfare system are in many cases completely dependent upon others for having their needs met. Decisions about them (what they must do, what they will receive, the rules they must follow) are made entirely by others—and not always with their best interests in mind. There is a tendency in our society to only deem someone as important, or valuable, if they achieve the means to sustain themselves entirely independently. This is a form of oppression.

3. Powerlessness: In addition to transferring their energies to those in power, the exploited are also subject to rules and laws which dictate how they must live their lives—rules and laws which they have no power to change. Young writes,

“Most people ... do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions, and in this sense most people lack significant power. ... The powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them.”

Powerlessness with respect to government laws and workplace rules is especially oppressive when it cuts across race and gender lines. For instance, if the people who make the rules are primarily white males, and the voices of non-white-males are under-represented among positions of power, then those rules run the risk of overlooking the needs and interests of those under-represented groups.

Young also discusses the notion of **respect**. She writes, “To treat people with respect is to be prepared to listen to what they have to say or to do what they request because they have some authority, experience, or influence.” She says that this is not something that is automatically presumed of a woman or non-white in our society. Rather, members of these oppressed groups must continually PROVE themselves in order to earn such respect—whereas, this is the default position toward a white male, who “are often treated with respect until their working-class status is revealed.” For non-white-males, it is the opposite that is often the default.

4. Cultural Imperialism: Young writes,

“To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. ... As a consequence, the dominant cultural products of the society ... express the experience, values, goals, and achievements of these groups. Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such.”

What Young is saying is that, basically, the dominant group—the group making most of the decisions for EVERYONE—sees the world through the lens of their OWN experience, and often makes decisions and shapes the world based upon what THEY want and need, totally forgetting or overlooking the fact that their own experience is not universally shared, and that needs and desires of other groups are often very different.

What is worse, these divisions between the “main” groups and the “other” groups are often tainted with implicit value judgments, where deviations from the norm or majority are seen as “abnormal”, and therefore deviant or inferior in some way. For instance, consider a few ways in which we tend to force human beings into categories of an “either / or” variety: *Black or white ; Gay or straight ; Male or female ; Reason or emotion ; 1st world or 3rd world ; civilized or savage ; wealthy or poor ; blue collar or white collar*). Is it possible that, for each of these either-or’s, there is a subtle connotation that one is BETTER than the other? If so, then such categories are “normatively loaded”—i.e., you OUGHT to be one rather than the other, or it is BETTER to be one rather than the other.

Such labels also lead to stereotyping, where, once someone is shoved into a category or group, now they find themselves bound to many inescapable assumptions that others will make about them, often negative. For instance, Young points out (sarcastically), everyone knows that gays are promiscuous, Native Americans are alcoholics, and women are good with children.

Even if someone in an “other” group is consciously aware that these stereotypes are false, they must navigate life with the awareness that many (most?) members of the dominant group believe they are TRUE. This leads to what Young calls a “double-consciousness”, where one constantly lives life from both the first and the third person perspective, viewing themselves from their own perspective, and from the perspective of the dominant group. Powerlessness creeps in here too, since the “others” have little power to affect the dominant group’s perspective, and little power to escape being viewed from that perspective. She writes,

“This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life.”

As a (perhaps) more innocent example, consider how Christmas themes saturate the entire nation for a month every year. The dominant religion’s holiday becomes a holiday of the WHOLE society. But, if the dominant culture DOES ever recognize the holiday of an under-represented group, it is often saturated with stereotypes originating from the perspective of that dominant group (think Cinco de Mayo).

Cultural imperialism is most damaging when an individual is so mired in oppression that they begin to internalize the dominant culture’s view of them; i.e., they may begin to see THEMSELVES as inferior, or powerless, etc., indoctrinated by the dominant culture—in this case, the “double-consciousness” collapses and the 3rd-person perspective becomes their FIRST-person perspective. Now, the powerless are no longer powerless because they are forced to be, without alternative; but rather because they “choose” to be.

5. Violence: It is common for members of various groups to live under the constant threat of violence simply because they are a member of that group. Though Young is writing in 1990, the threat of violence is still everywhere in our time. For instance:

- Each year, ~200,000 cases of **rape** are reported (99% of the rapists are male, and 91% of rape victims are female). About 1 in 6 women in the U.S. have experienced either rape or attempted rape. One in six! (Young notes that the number could even be as high as one in three!)
- About 12,000 cases of **sexual harassment** are reported each year (and the majority do not get reported at all). About 85% of these are reported by women being harassed by men.
- **Innocent shootings** of young black males has been a big issue in the news lately, since [Sanford, FL](#) and [Ferguson, MO](#). In both cases, young black men were fatally shot (by a regular citizen in the first case, a police officer in the second), seemingly unprovoked, but the offenders were not punished. This has led many to question whether or not our society is one in which black lives matter.

***Some Data:** Young males: Many have lamented the fact that young black males (between ages 18-34) are disproportionately killed by police officers. Let's look at the data (2015): Though comprising only 1.6% of the population, 15.6% of the 1,146 police killings were members of this demographic. Whites of the same age comprise about 8% of the population, but only 18.4% of the police killings. In short, black males in this age group were 4.2 times more likely to be killed by a police officer in 2015 than white males of this same age group.*

Unarmed victims: 6.9% of those killed by police in 2015 were unarmed black people, and 9.2% were unarmed white people. Yet, black people comprise only 13.3% of the population, while white people comprise 62.0%. In short, an unarmed black person was 3.5 times as likely to be killed by a police officer in 2015 than an unarmed white person.

Total: Overall, the data indicates that a black person was 2.5 times more likely to be killed by an officer than a white person in 2015 (7.91 deaths per million black population vs. 2.91 deaths per million white population).

In short, these acts of violence disproportionately cut across racial lines.

The above are just a few examples. If one is a woman, she must live with the fear that at any time she might be the victim of rape or sexual harassment. If one is black, s/he must wonder whether s/he will be perceived as guilty until proven innocent (rather than the other way around), and therefore more likely to be shot and killed by someone who feels "threatened" by their presence. (But this is not to say that these are the ONLY such groups disproportionately affected by violence—individuals in our society are also often the victims of violence due to their religion, or their sexual orientation, and so on).

This fear of violence is a form of oppression. Young writes:

"Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group. Any woman, for example, has a reason to fear rape. Regardless of what a Black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality or powerlessness, he lives knowing he is subject to attack or harassment. The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack to oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy."

Here is an excellent example of what Young means by SYSTEMIC injustice or oppression. For one does not need to BE raped (or the victim of some form of violence) in order to be oppressed. Rather, one only need live in a society where such violence OCCURS and is the NORM. Merely living under the THREAT of such violence, she says, is oppressive.