

## Overview of the Issues Behind Oppression:

The complexities of oppression cause many people to either have a surface level understanding of the phenomenon, to ignore the philosophy and definitions behind oppression entirely, or lead people to embrace greater knowledge and understanding so that they may keep from causing harm and work to make repairs and support those who have been oppressed.

This discussion guide provides definitions and tools for furthering understanding of oppression in all its forms. One of the biggest messages to be learned from this tool is that all human beings are susceptible to being oppressive in various ways, and if one is working toward avoiding causing harm to others then there is a need to spend more time focusing on understanding personal thoughts, beliefs, and behavior that may be oppressive rather than focusing on how one is not oppressive at all.

Topics of oppression often bring numerous emotions to bear in those considering their stereotypes, privilege, and power; experience in being oppressed; gaining insight into past choices to be oppressive; and witnessing oppression of others. It can be important to take care of yourself when learning and considering this information by talking to a trusted friend or family member, seeking out counseling, or engaging in other self-care activities as a part of processing the information.

## Defining Oppression:

When discussing a topic as broad as “oppression,” starting with definitions can help bring people together when discussing specifics. What are some possible ways of defining oppression?

People who are engaged in thinking and discussing definitions of oppression may brainstorm ideas very similar to the dictionary definition, but unfortunately this definition is only one small part of what oppression is. For the sake of using this discussion guide and the components that follow, the following working definition is suggested:

***“Oppression is a series of institutional attitudes, beliefs, and behavior that increases entitlement for one group and discriminates against another person or group. These systems enable dominant groups and individuals to exert control over target groups through use of dominant power, a history of privilege over the target group, and stereotyped prejudging against groups who do not fit into the dominant ‘norm.’”***

This definition allows the ability to discuss attitudes, beliefs, and behavior behind entitlement, which is a natural human experience that can be taken to a level of harm that is not always intentional or conscious. Greater understanding of the components of oppression can also provide added clarity on oppression as a whole.

## Components of Oppression:

### **1. STEREOTYPES & PREJUDICE:**

Having stereotypes and prejudice is human – everyone has them, and much of the time they are helpful. They are like shortcuts for interacting in various situations, and they can be true perceptions. The challenge is that they are sometimes false perceptions that lead to having attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and behavior toward a person that are unfounded for that individual’s personality and life. It can be helpful to first differentiate between stereotypes and prejudice:

***Stereotypes are ideas about a location, a group of people, a situation, or an event based on observed traits, which are often simplified understandings of complex behavior. These observed traits may be due to personal experiences or through learning about these traits from others. Often these ideas can be used to form a bias against locations, groups of people, situations, and events.***

***Prejudice is a process of building assumptions about a location, group of people, a situation, or an event that leads to judgment of a representative locale, person, situation, or event. These judgments are not based on learning anything specific or unique about the individual locale, person, situation, or event – but assuming that the traits shared by a greater whole are true for the individual.***

A simple way to think about the difference is to remember that stereotypes are commonly held ideas, while prejudices are biases about people, places, situations, or events. Stereotypes will build and strengthen prejudices toward others. Often, stereotypes become stronger when someone does not have exposure to a location, group of people, situation, or an event.

What other examples are there for healthy and unhealthy stereotypes or prejudices?

## **2. HISTORY OF PRIVILEGE:**

Another strong component of oppression has to do with understanding history and privilege and how these give power to oppression. History and privilege are not earned or chosen by individuals, they merely exist as a part of one's heritage. An important practice in limiting oppressive thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors is to be able to know about and acknowledge one's own history of entitlement. The definition of privilege is:

***Privilege is the history of entitlement for a group of people. An individual's privilege may grant him or her additional benefits, immunities, powers, or entitlements.***

Examples of privilege can be found by looking at historical events such as how African Americans have been treated in the United States over time. White, European Americans were mostly immune to slavery laws, were given benefits of land ownership (white, European men), and had power over Black people in social environments throughout the land. Individual white European men and women did not have to ask for these things, they were granted at birth due to historical precedence.

Often, an individual's privileges are invisible to the one who has them, but painfully obvious to those who do not benefit from that privilege and history. For example, if a person is able bodied and healthy, it can be common for that person not to understand items used by, or services provided to the handicapped or disabled, unless they experience something personally, have a loved one who is not able-bodied, or are conscious of their own privilege behind being healthy and able bodied.

What are other examples of privilege in our society?

## **3. POWER:**

When oppression occurs, it is often one powerful group or individual harming or limiting a less powerful individual or group. Power, itself, can be hard to quantify or understand beyond sensing it, or experiencing it. However, understanding the definition may offer a more concrete way to identify and work to use power in responsible ways that avoid harming others:

***Power is the ability to influence and control others – with or without resistance. Power offers advantages and privileges to those who hold it.***

There are several places in society where power is obvious. Someone who is rich has the ability to influence and control those who have less money and resources. Someone with more education has more influence to control others and attain higher status employment than those with less education.

However, power is strongly tied to privilege. It is possible for someone to gain power without privilege, but it is often easier for someone who has a history behind their individual traits such as race, gender, sexual orientation, wealth, religion, and other factors. Those who rise to power without privilege may also experience oppression in those categories where they lack privilege. Such as a rich Japanese woman experiencing racism or sexism.

### **Overview:**

Oppression is a combination of POWER, PRIVILEGE, and PREJUDICE. Some people are born with a number of privileges, and with certain histories of entitlement, it may be easier for that person to have influence or control over groups who lack that privilege. When that person with privilege has prejudices against someone – not for knowing them as an individual, but for the stereotypes they represent – then oppression grows and becomes harmful.

### **Using Violence as an Oppressive Tactic:**

Unfortunately, violence is a means of keeping people in line and in narrowly defined places and roles. Violence is fed by a person's or peoples' sense of their right to dominate and control, their sense of superiority over a group of people who because of their status in another group, they consider inferior to them. The threat of violence is enough to silence people. Some words keep alive our memories of the ultimate means of control – violence. Examples include the Holocaust, cross burning, burning of witches, domestic and sexual violence. The words are used to remind those in oppressed classes what would happen if one steps out of line, if one is too vocal, if one demands his or her rights, forgets to be quiet, to pass, to be invisible. Often the words themselves are steeped in historical significance, such as the term “faggot” for gays, which originates from the era of burning of witches. Witches were put on a pole or stake, kindling was placed beneath the accused, and the accused was killed by burning. During that era, those who were found or believed to be gay were deemed to be unworthy of tying to a stake and were instead thrown into the burning tinder of the fire. The branches and tinder of the fire was called “faggots” and gays were referred to as such to reduce their value and remind them of their insignificance as compared to those who are not gay.

### **Blaming the Oppressed:**

The use of violence as an oppressive tactic culminates in individual, social, and institutional blaming of the oppressed for troubles in society. So that power can be reinforced and supported by those with less power, blame for societal ills are often placed on those oppressed. An example of blaming the oppressed is the myth of scarcity, which is a commonly held belief by both oppressor and sometimes oppressed classes that there is less of something leading to a justified limitation of wealth and resource distribution.

### Use of Economics and Resources to Oppress:

The myth of scarcity leads people to believe there are a limited number of resources and wealth to go around, justifying oppressions such as nationalism – where citizens of the United States believe that it is okay to be oppressive and hurtful toward immigrants because there are not enough jobs to go around, or enough wealth to be distributed. However, those who believe in this myth fail to recognize that jobs held by immigrants can be ones citizens will not work, and that wealth is heavily concentrated in the upper wealth classes with plenty that could be distributed to the less fortunate.

At the same time, in oppressions such as heterosexism, those who are oppressive toward LGBT individuals will sometimes focus on belief that gays and lesbians getting married would “destroy the sanctity of marriage” while ignoring the incredibly high divorce rate for heterosexual couples, and the proliferation of domestic violence.

Overall, oppression continues in all these categories due to systems that reduce the ability of those in oppressed classes to assertively demand fair and equal treatment. Oppression also persists due to a lack of those with the power of oppressor classes taking action to help those who are the victims of oppression, and ignoring the plight of those who are oppressed.

### Establishment and Forcing of Norms:

The origin of the word “normal” is from carpentry. A box that had a set of fixed measurements was used to build things that were based on “normal” figures. It was not until 1877 that a Eugenist by the name of Francis Galton began to use the word to describe human behavior and characteristics. Galton believed that certain people were unfit, and when these people had children they were endangering society. He developed a machine (called the “Galton Box”), which created a demonstration of sorting characteristics into a “Bell Curve.” His idea was that if certain people were prevented from having children, the human race would be saved from potential destruction.

His work served to change the definition of “normal” from a standard measure used in carpentry to a concept of “living up to standard.” His ideas were used by Eugenesits who believed that certain people should be sterilized and kept from reproducing. Often these people were poor, from undesirable countries, had physical disabilities, and were non-white. His ideas were also used by Nazi Germany to justify genocide.

When considering the components of oppression, the ideas behind “normal” have been used as justifications for prejudices and stereotypes since Galton put forward ideas that were used to create a greater-than and less-than series of entitlements. Prior to his work, people had been classified as being less-than and greater-than, but without the use of terms and published works to justify such claims.

Oppression works to establish norms that people must achieve to live up to standard. Those in power and privilege set these norms, often in ways that are unrealistic and create barriers. In certain circumstances, these norms are forced upon people to make a change in the way an oppressive group seeks to create.

For example, heterosexists tend to believe that being heterosexual is a norm, and that anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, or asexual is abnormal. The classifying of people as “abnormal” creates justification by heterosexists to limit individual personhood.