

## Definition of Terms:

### **OPPRESSION**

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.”

### **OPPRESSOR CLASS:**

Someone who has power and privilege typically due to birthright. When an oppressor class has prejudice, it can quickly become oppressive. For example, someone who is born heterosexual has power and privilege based on the fact that people who are heterosexual have more power than other sexual orientations, and that power has been held throughout history. Someone who is heterosexual inherits power and privilege by birthright, and can immediately become heterosexist by having prejudicial attitudes, thoughts, beliefs and behavior toward someone in the LGBT community.

### **OPPRESSED CLASS:**

An individual who lacks power and privilege in a certain type of oppression is in an oppressed class. For example, someone who is physically disabled is unable to have the same level of power as someone who is able-bodied to be able to navigate the world on a physical level, and history has given privilege to those who are able-bodied. It is possible for an individual to be an oppressor class in one type of oppression and an oppressed class in another.

### **POWER:**

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

### **PRIVILEGE:**

The history of entitlement for a group of people. An individual’s privilege may grant him or her additional benefits, immunities, powers, or entitlements.

### **DEHUMANIZING:**

A systematic process of removing a person or group’s humanity, thereby placing them at lower value and meaning and justifying use of control, abuse, violence, and indifference against them.

### **PREJUDICE:**

A process of building assumptions about a location, group of people, a situation, or an event. These assumptions lead to judgment toward 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. Prejudice serves to dehumanize through a series of beliefs not tied to an individual or group’s full characteristics.

### **STEREOTYPES:**

Shortcuts in thinking about a location, a group of people, a situation, or an event. These shortcuts are 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. Stereotypes can lead to creating a hierarchy of powers, where some groups have more validity than others. This myth of hierarchy can lead to dehumanizing prejudice against others.

**UNCONSCIOUS PRIVILEGE:**

For each oppressor class, when an individual does not understand or recognize the advantages, immunities, benefits, powers, and entitlements they receive as being a part of that oppressor class. This often leads those with unconscious privilege to ignore and dismiss the experiences of the oppressed, or raises level of denial of entitled prejudicial attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and behavior. For example, “white privilege” is a phenomenon wherein a white European person in the United States denies his or her advantages of being white, and does not think about the plight and experiences of oppression felt by minority racial groups.

**REVERSE OPPRESSION:**

A myth about oppression wherein someone believes that an oppressed group is turning against an oppressor group, therefore becoming oppressive. This is a myth because oppression exists as a combination of power, privilege, and prejudice. Someone who is in an oppressed group will lack power and privilege in that group – however he or she may have power and privilege in a different group. Often “reverse oppression” is either where a person in an oppressor class is uncomfortable with someone in an oppressed class becoming empowered, or where someone in an oppressed group has prejudice toward someone in an oppressor group, but without the power and privilege within that group, it does not have the ability to be hurtful in the same way oppression is when it is supported by power and privilege. For example, “reverse racism” is a belief that someone of a minority race is racist toward someone of a majority race (in the United States such as a Latino toward a white European). Someone of a minority race may be prejudiced toward someone of a majority race, but without the power and privilege held by the majority race – there is not as much support or context of harm caused by an oppressor class.

**Arenas of Oppression:**

*The following arenas of oppression highlight the sources of oppressive attitudes and behavior. These arenas overlap and often feed each other. Listed in order of individual to larger group oppression.*

**INDIVIDUAL OPPRESSION:**

Personal, individual use of oppression against other groups or individuals.

**INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION:**

An arena of oppression wherein someone who is in an oppressed class has attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behavior toward him or herself that lower personal importance, self-esteem, value, and meaning. For example, someone with a mental health issue may focus on negative aspects of the disorder and believe he/she is unworthy or less than those who do not have that disorder.

**HORIZONTAL HOSTILITY:**

When someone has unfavorable and unhealthy attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behavior toward others who share an oppressed class, that person may be aggressive, mean, and hurtful to people within their shared oppressed class. For example, someone who is gay may have great hostility to others who are LGBT.

**SOCIAL OPPRESSION:**

A system wherein a group of individuals with shared entitlement and stereotypes about another group feed upon each other’s power and privilege to engage in oppressive and hurtful behavior toward the disliked group. For example, the Klu Klux Klan organizing groups of white, European descent people to focus on hurting minority racial groups.

**INSTITUTIONAL OPPRESSION:**

A system granting power and resources to one group (the dominant or privileged group) and withholding them from one another (the targeted or subordinated group) through the asymmetrical and unequal relationships between groups. Both the oppressed and the oppressor groups adapt to these societal conventions. There are unearned advantages and freedoms associated with being a member of a dominant group in a society, and there is a great deal of defensiveness and resistance to changing anything that grants institutional benefits to one group over another. Change could lead to power loss within the dominant group. For example, prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act, companies could discriminate against people they determined to be handicapped in some fashion. When the law was in process, groups of businesses and individuals who were members of those businesses were unhappy that they would be unable to bar certain people from working and would need to change their company policies to be non-discriminatory.

**Types of Oppression:**

*The following list of oppressions (often called “-isms”) are descriptions of hurtful prejudicial attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and behavior from those with privilege and power over those who lack that type of privilege and power. No one form of oppression is greater or lesser than another, however classism is a common denominator for most forms of oppression and often overlaps in different ways with each.*

**ABLEISM:**

Oppression from those who are able-bodied and healthy toward those with physical, mental, or emotional handicaps and disabilities.

**AGEISM:**

Oppression from those who are in the age of majority (26-64 years old) over those in the age of minority (0-24 years old, and 65 and above).

**CLASSISM:**

Two forms of classism are possible, and often overlap:

- Educational classism, which consists of oppression from people who have higher education toward those who have lower education. This form of classism is not tied to a specific degree or educational achievement and can be someone with a Ph.D. oppressing someone with a Master’s Degree, or someone with a high school diploma oppressing someone with a G.E.D.
- Economic classism, which consists of oppression from people who have more money and resources toward those who have less money and resources. Like educational classism, this form of oppression may exist from someone with millions of dollars of assets toward someone with a few hundred thousand dollars of assets, or from someone who makes \$20/hr oppressing someone who earns minimum wage.

**RACISM:**

Is a system where one race maintains supremacy over another race through a set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures, and institutional power. Racism is a “system of structured inequality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges, and benefits of the society are available to individuals according to their presumed membership in “particular racial groups” (Barbara Love, 1994. Understanding Internalized Oppression). A person of any race can have prejudices about people of other races, but only members of the dominant social group can exhibit racism because racism is prejudice plus the institutional power to enforce it.

**NATIONALISM:**

Oppression from those of one country against those of another. Often these beliefs carry over into oppression toward citizens of that nation within the country that is deemed to be superior. For example, citizens of the United States believing in an idea that their nation is inherently better than Mexico, therefore concluding that citizens of Mexico are of less value than American citizens.

**RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION:**

Oppression from those who are of the religious majority (in the United States, protestant Christianity) toward those of a religious or philosophical (such as anti-theists or atheists) minority.

**LOOKISM:**

A modifier for any type of oppression. The more someone looks, behaves like, or seems as if they fit into a category of oppression – the more oppression that individual will face. For example, the darker someone's skin color, the more racism that person will face.

**SEXISM:**

The cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege men and subordinate and denigrate women.

**HETEROSEXISM:**

A term that applies to negative attitudes, bias and discrimination in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. It can include the presumption that everyone is heterosexual or that opposite-sex attractions and relationships are the norm and therefore superior.

**ELITISM:**

Another oppression modifier. Elitism is the belief that one's advantages make them better than those without such advantages. This can apply to any oppressor class, and leads to confusion over intersectionality. An example of elitism might be someone believing their religious beliefs are better than another set of religious beliefs (even within the same religion). This religious elitism will lead to judgments, attacks, dismissal or opinion, and disconnect from someone with differing religious beliefs. While all topics of oppression above will have their own aspects of elitism, some overarching examples might include political beliefs, scientific knowledge, educational level, exposure to experiences, and cultural awareness.

**Intersectionality:**

Intersectionality is the idea that all forms of oppression overlap, and that no one kind of oppression is more or less impactful, dangerous, better or worse than another. This overlap means that an individual might be both oppressed and be oppressing others simultaneously. Separating out different levels of oppressor/oppressed class can be challenging, and a common analogy compares intersectionality to a stack of records or CDs - all might be playing different music and tracks at different speeds, or might not be playing at all at any given time. If you are listening to all at once, sorting out any one song might be difficult, but not impossible - it takes knowledge of the song, focusing on the music despite the cacophony of sounds, and the patience to deal with the overwhelming input of information. It is possible to both intervene in someone using one form of oppression and provide support for trauma experienced due to being oppressed at the same time, but takes a humanistic approach to do so.