

Oppression, Privilege and the Life Affects:
A Study of Human Life

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Oppression:
The Study of Human Life Affected by Oppression and Privilege

"Any white person living in the United States will develop opinions about race simply by 'swimming in the water' of our culture" (DiAngelo 8). I was given this reading during my internship at Out Now, and it had a great impact on how I look at life. This quote is basically saying no matter what you do, you will create beliefs about different oppressed groups, either bad or good. This statement can pertain to any kind of oppression not just racism, but also, classism, ableism, or sexism.

Being a social worker requires you to work with different populations of people and to have full competence of their culture and behaviors. To be competent with groups of people you may not be familiar with, it is important to understand if they are the oppressed or privileged group because that has a great impact on how one is treated by society which in turn will have a great effect on their life. I have learned in the past that "person-in-environment" is vital to one's behavior. This simply means that personal behavior and the environment go hand and hand. This perspective is based on the belief that social workers use a dual focus on the person and the environment, and I believe that the environment one lives in is dependent on different privileges and oppressions.

"Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do" (Johnson 17). This simply means that a privileged group has the right of values over the oppressed for no reason other than their identities. For example, being a white male I have less of a chance of going to jail compared to an African-American that has committed the same crime. Also, being a male, there is a greater chance that I have a higher salary than a female working the same job. When you are given power from being

privileged, life is much simpler and many things are handed to you, opposed to being oppressed and having to work harder to succeed.

Being placed in the privileged group for many personal identities such as race, gender, sex, class, and more makes me feel uncomfortable because I feel that I am not better than any other person. I do not look at myself as better than someone else because I am not placed in the oppressed category.

An example of a time I have been in power was when I was a senior in High School and I volunteered as a student advisor at the Middle School with homework club. Homework club was a collection of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders that struggled at home doing their homework for a number of reasons. I would help out every Tuesday and Thursday, and I was simply given power over these children due to my age. In our society today age has a great amount of power, most of the time if you are older you are given more power no matter the situation.

On the flip side of privilege there is oppression. To understand oppression it is important to understand the three types of oppression: individual, institutional, and cultural. However, before that you need to understand the basic definition of oppression. Oppression is defined as, "the exploitation of at least one social category by the dominant social group" (Oppression and Privilege Framework 1), and operates, intentionally and unintentionally and on individual, institutional, and cultural levels. An example of oppression could be racism, sexism, ableism, religion oppression, heterosexism and more. For example, a "person with disabilities are targets of negative and inaccurate ascriptions and have few guideposts to define their social treatment or are rejected based on appearance due to their disability even though they are not necessarily defined by their

disability" (Palombi 61). Now that we understand the basics we can look closer into the different types of oppression.

Individual oppression are the thoughts, attitudes, and actions that are intentional or unintentional that depict prejudice or judgment against a particular social group (Oppression and Privilege Framework 2). For example, intentional individual oppression may be calling someone "gay" due to their sexual orientation. Another example could possibly be the belief that whites are more intellectual than African-Americans. In other cases individual oppression could be unintentional, such as laughing at a racist joke or pointing out that all the disabled people sit together at lunch, yet not say anything about the non disabled people sitting together.

Next, institutional oppression is described as, "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 " (Oppression and Privilege Framework 2). This as well, can be intentional and unintentional. Intentional examples are sales clerks watching African-Americans closer while shopping in stores for fear of them stealing items, or white people being more likely to get into college over an African-American. Examples for unintentional institutional oppression are that females get paid less for the same job as a male, or that the sentence for distributing crack is higher than the sentence for the distribution of cocaine because crack is predominately sold by African-Americans and cocaine is predominately sold by whites.

Lastly, oppression at the societal or cultural level refers to the means by which the oppression is institutional in society through different, social norms, roles rituals,

language, music, and art that is reinforced by the superior social group (Oppression and Privilege Framework 3). This type of oppression can also be either intentional or unintentional. An example of intentional cultural oppression is that English is the language everyone should speak. Another intentional example is that white culture is the "correct" culture. On the other hand this oppression can be unintentional, such as poor or homeless people are lazy and could have a job if they worked harder, or the holidays Christians celebrate are the "correct" holidays and all people of all religions should celebrate them.

As stated above, I have been honored to be in many of the privileged groups being a white male, however I have been placed in the oppressed group as well. When I was about 7 years old, I was diagnosed with dyslexia. Dyslexia is defined as a learning disability that impairs a person's ability to read. Although I am dyslexic, I have not let dyslexia define who I am. My mother always told me I was just as smart as everyone else only my brain worked differently. However, that was hard for me to believe for many years. Over time, dyslexia has helped me become the hardworking, determined person I am today, but I have learned not to let it classify me as disabled. From my struggles with dyslexia, I am not classified as abled bodied, and am placed in the oppressed section of ableism.

Going through school with dyslexia was very difficult for me and many times I felt prejudice against me. I remember in eighth grade, when the first vocabulary list of words was being passed out, one of my school aid teachers give me less words than everyone else even though I told her that I could and wanted to do the same work as everyone else, but she did not think I could. This made me feel unintelligent and made

me believe that there was no way I could succeed in school if I could not take a normal vocabulary quiz. If she had just listened to me and believed that I could have done the same quiz I would have not felt unintelligent. However, I studied very hard and got a 100% on the modified test to show her that I could take the normal test and the next week I told her, "I got a 100% last week, and you should let me take the normal vocabulary quiz this week." Now when I look back at this time I feel that I was treated unfairly and differently simply because I had the label of dyslexic. They did not listen to what I wanted but rather were looking at my label.

While I was in the position of privilege during homework club, I felt uncomfortable because I had power simply due to my age. Helping the children with their homework was empowering because I could help the children complete their homework while being a good role model for them to look up to. On the other hand, when I was in the oppressed position I felt uncomfortable but in a different way. I felt inferior and powerless, and could have been empowered if the school aide had shown encouragement for me to challenge myself rather than ignoring my request and assuming that I would fail.

As a social worker you are often in positions of power and authority over your clients and it is your job to empower and try to eliminate discrimination. Last semester I learned many steps that would help begin to eliminate oppression. The first step to eliminating privilege and oppression is to acknowledge that it exists. Second, after you acknowledge oppression exists, you must pay attention and understand how oppression operates and then find a way to participate in change. Next, you must learn to listen, especially if you are part of the dominant group, because you are the people that will

make the change. Lastly, to eliminate oppression you must actually do something and take risks. For example, make noise and be seen. By this I mean stand up for people that do not have the privilege that you have.

I often hear people say, "A world where everyone is equal would be boring." However, I don't think a world without oppression would be boring. Not only would people feel safe at all times, but the elimination of oppression would allow more people to be empowered. A world without oppression would be a world of equality and love, a social worker's paradise. Working towards the elimination of oppression should be the life mission for all social workers. However, oppression is on a societal level, and can not be changed by one single person.

References

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