

A WORKING DEFINITION OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION*

This document will use the term "isms" to denote all forms of social oppression i.e.; gender = **sexism**, race = **racism**, class = **classism**, religion = **anti-Semitism**, **anti-Catholicism**, toward the physically different = **able-bodiedism**, toward the young = **adultism**, toward gay men, lesbians and bisexuals = **heterosexism**, toward the old = **ageism**, etc.

A. Human beings are members of the same species. The term "ism" is an useful shorthand way of categorizing the systematic mistreatment of people according to one of their many identities, biological or cultural.

B. At its most extreme, the systematic mistreatment connected to "isms" takes the form of physical violence but it occurs in many other forms as well.

Pervasive invalidation, the denial or non-recognition of the full humanity of people, also constitutes mistreatment. Putting the matter in these terms may clear up the confusion which is generated by thinking "isms" are a matter of treating people differently. In fact, what is often called "different treatment" is in reality "inhuman treatment", i.e. treatment which denies the humanity of the individual person.

C. The systematic mistreatment of any group of people generates misinformation about them which in turn becomes the explanation of or justification for continued mistreatment.

D. Because misinformation about people functions as the justification for their continued mistreatment, it becomes socially empowered or sanctioned misinformation. It is recycled through the society as a form of conditioning that effects everyone. In this way misinformation about a group of people or a biological factor (such as being deaf) becomes everyone's "ordinary" assumptions.

E. For purposes of clarity it is helpful to use the term "internalized oppression" to designate the misinformation that people may have about themselves or their cultures. The purpose of this term is to pinpoint that this misinformation is the consequence of the "ism". It is not an inherent feature or product of their culture, gender, biological make-up, etc. An example of racist internalized oppression would be people of color believing that they are less intelligent than people of European decent.

* this is a revised version of the ground breaking work done by Ms. Ricky Sherover-Marcuse in the area of racism

3. No young person acquires misinformation by their own free choice. These attitudes and beliefs are a mixture of misinformation and ignorance which has to be imposed upon young people through a painful process of **social conditioning**. You have to be taught to hate and fear.

4. Misinformation is harmful to all human beings. Misinformation about people that feeds our attitudes and beliefs is like having a clamp on our minds. It distorts our perception of reality.

5. *No individual holds onto misinformation voluntarily. People hold onto these attitudes and beliefs because this misinformation has been represented to them by their most reliable sources to date and because no one has been able to help them out of the misinformation.*

6. People will change their minds about deeply held convictions under the following conditions:

- 1) the new position is presented in a way that makes sense to them;
- 2) they trust the person who is presenting the new position; and
- 3) they are not blamed for having had misinformation.

7. *People hurt others because they themselves have been hurt. In this society we have all experienced systematic mistreatment as young people - sometimes through physical violence - but also through the invalidation of our intelligence, the disregard of our feelings, the discounting of our abilities.*

As a result of these experiences, we tend to both internalize this mistreatment by accepting it as "the way things are", and to externalize it by mistreating others.

Part of the process of unlearning "isms" involves becoming aware of how this cycle of mistreatment is perpetuated in day to day encounters and interactions.

8. As young people we have often witnessed despair and cynicism in the adults around us, and we have often been made to feel powerless in the face of injustice. "Isms" continue in part because people feel powerless to do anything about them.

9. There are times when we have failed to act, and times when we did not achieve as much as we wanted to in the struggle against any given "ism". Unlearning "isms" also involves understanding the difficulties we have had and learning how to overcome them, without blaming ourselves for having had those difficulties.

10. The situation is not hopeless. People can grow and change; we are not condemned to repeat the past. "Isms" can be examined, analyzed, and unlearned.