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Chapter Three

Oppression at the Personal Level

Normalizing Gaze and Objectified Bodies

In the last chapter it was pointed out that the scientific discourse of the nineteenth century gave legitimation to a white, male, bourgeois, body type and facial features as the norm or hierarchical standard against which all other groups were measured (Young, 1990). Using this measuring stick, the autonomous, neutral, and objective subject of knowledge, who typically fit these characteristics, observed by way of normalizing gazes (Foucault, 1977) that all other bodies were degenerate or less developed. Whole groups of people came to be defined as different, as the Other, and members of these groups became locked or imprisoned in their bodies.

In addition to a superior body type the nineteenth-century ideal of health and beauty was primarily an ideal of manly virtue[1]—a strong, self-controlled rational man distanced from sexuality, emotion, and everything disorderly or disturbing (Mosse, 1985; Young, 1990). Those groups of people referred to above—among others, people of colour, Jewish persons, and women—came to be defined as the Other because they did not possess the ideal body type, and they also were considered (by white bourgeois males) not to possess these virtues, which affirmed their degeneracy. The notion of whiteness was identified with reason, while blackness was associated with body (Kovel, 1984). This allowed people who were white to identify themselves as possessing reason and, therefore, to be the subject of knowledge, and to identify people of colour as the objects of knowledge (Said, 1978). Nineteenth-century discourse often extended the concept of black to depict Jews and gays and lesbians. A new discourse on old age also occurred at this time, shifting it from an association with wisdom and endurance to an identification with frailty, incontinence, and senility (Cole, 1986, cited in Young, 1990). All groups that did not meet the norm of the young, white, strong, self-controlled, rational, bourgeois man were objectified (in varying degrees) as the degenerate Others.

Subordinate groups were given negative identities by the dominant group on

the basis of bodily characteristics (ugly, dirty, smelly, defiled, impure, contaminated, weak, disfigured, sick, and so on) and on the basis of inferior intellect and character (lazy, irrational, intellectually underdeveloped, mentally childlike, hypersexual or asexual, brutish, uncivilized, overly visible, criminal, and so on). This is not to say that all subordinate groups endure the same composite stereotypes (though many do), but all groups have some of these negative characteristics assigned to them by the dominant group.

Acts of Oppression at the Personal Level

As outlined in the previous chapter, oppression at the personal level consists of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours that depict negative prejudgments of subordinate groups. Oppression at the personal level is usually based on stereotypes and may be manifest in conscious acts of aggression and/or hatred, but today it tends to be in the form of unconscious acts of aversion. Let us look at both types of oppression.

Conscious Acts of Aggression and/or Hatred

Many acts of oppression at the personal level reflect the notion of an inferior and/or ugly body type. African North Americans have experienced a number of derogatory names imposed on them by white people in reference to the colour of their skin—nigger, coon, spade, darky, smokey, shadow. Similarly, North American First Nations people have been subject to the names 'redskin' or 'savage' or 'Chief', people of Asian origin to the degrading labels of 'Japs', 'gooks', or 'slanty-eyes', and physically challenged persons to 'crip' or 'spaz' (the former is an abbreviation of 'cripple' and the latter an abbreviation of 'spastic'). It is still common to hear males address or talk about women in vulgar versions of their sexual characteristics. This insulting type of labelling may be made directly to a member of a subordinate group or it may be found in locker-room humour or in graffiti. Whatever form it takes, name-calling devalues members of subordinate groups by accentuating differences between the dominant and subordinate groups in a negative way. It reflects the belief that the characteristics of the dominant group (skin colour, eye shape, male body) represent the norm or universal standard and that anything not meeting the standard is open to ridicule and insult. The message to the subordinate group is that they are inferior because they do not match up with these standards or norms.

Although legislation today aims to protect people from harassment and codes of behaviour make these actions socially unacceptable, they still occur too often. One just has to visit the men's washrooms in any *university* to find some of the most extreme racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic sentiments written on the lavatory walls and doors. These anonymous expressions of hatred towards persons who are defined as different and as having ugly or fearful bodies constitute clear evidence that those thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, which portray a negative prejudgment of subordinate groups, still exist today in spite of a discursive commitment to equal respect and consideration for all.

Objectified and socially constructed ugly and degenerate bodies are not the

only objects of conscious acts of oppression; after all, nineteenth-century biological and medical science held that the superior body type directly determines the intellectual and character superiority of persons in this group (West, 1982). Conversely, the inferior body type directly determines the intellectual and character inferiority of persons in this group. With the universal standard being a rational, strong, self-controlled, and autonomous white, bourgeois male, whole groups of people were and are classified as intellectually and morally degenerate (Young, 1990). For example, women were considered to be physically delicate and weak because of the specific constitution of their bodies and subject to madness, irrationality, and childlike behaviour (Astbury, 1996).

The Iron Lady

A common response in the US in the 1970s and 1980s to the question of whether or not a woman could or should ever become President was: 'No, because at the first indication of a war a woman President would likely start to cry' (rather than exercise the manly virtues of decisive, strong, and strategic leadership). There are exceptions to this gender-exclusive rule, however. Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was often portrayed as 'male-like' or 'a pseudo male' (possessing strength, reason, and able to make the hard decisions, etc.) as evidenced by the label of 'the *iron* lady' that was given to her.

Other characteristics often assigned to members of subordinate groups include: sexual licentiousness (women and people of colour), sexual degeneracy (gay and lesbian persons), asexuality (older persons and disabled people), childlike stupidity (people of colour, women, older persons), irresponsibility (most subordinate groups), laziness (most subordinate groups), criminality (most subordinate groups), and intellectual deficiencies (most subordinate groups).

These and other characteristics, which are defined by the dominant group as part of the identity of subordinate groups, are used in the same way as derogatory names—to harass, ridicule, defame, intimidate, and, in effect, remind subordinate populations of their second-class status. At the same time the definition of subordinate groups as degenerate and intellectually and morally inferior provides a convenient rationale for reserving most of life's opportunities for the dominant group. Decent income and jobs, education, good health, supportive networks, social and political inclusion, and adequate housing in nice neighbourhoods ought to go to members of the dominant group, who are considered to be more deserving and worthy. Otherwise, opportunities would only be squandered away. Members of the dominant class will often point to the vandalizing of public housing as evidence of a lazy, irresponsible, and ungrateful group of people.

The most extreme form of a conscious act of aggression and hatred is violence against members of oppressed groups. The fear and loathing of socially

Ungrateful or Unjust?

John, a 14-year-old boy, and his family lived in a relatively new public housing neighbourhood. It seemed to John that as soon as the parents of friends he made outside his neighbourhood learned where he lived, he was not invited back to their homes. He also had applied for a number of part-time jobs, but whenever the person taking his application noticed John's address, the tone of the interview changed and John never received a call to come to work, although others outside the neighbourhood did. At school he did not seem to receive the same favourable treatment from certain teachers that other children did. One day he overheard one of his teachers referring to 'the troublemakers who come from that welfare neighbourhood'. It seemed to John that his home address caused him a lot of problems. He soon became a willing and regular participant in vandalizing the property and grounds of the public housing estate.

constructed ugly bodies, in concert with cultural stereotypes, have much to do with harassment and physical violence perpetrated on members of oppressed groups. In the previous chapter an overview of violence was presented as one of Young's (1990) five forms or faces of oppression. Young notes that violence is: (1) systemic when it is directed at members of a subordinate group just because they are members of that group; (2) a social practice when members of a subordinate group are sought to beat up, rape, or taunt; (3) legitimized when it is tolerated or found to be unsurprising because it happens frequently, or when perpetrators receive light or no punishment; (4) mostly irrational and xenophobic; and (5) a form of injustice that a theory of distributive justice does not capture.

All members of subordinate groups must live with the fear of random and unprovoked physical attacks on their person, family, or property. African Americans may not fear lynching and public whipping to the extent they once did, but they still experience a high incidence of racial violence, including beatings and rape by on-duty police officers. Gay-bashing is common today, as is the physical abuse of children and the elderly. Physical violence (beatings, sexual assault, murder) against women continues at epidemic levels. Ethnic violence is prevalent against Jews, as is government-sanctioned violence by police against striking workers on picket lines. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States have resulted in wide-scale violence in many Western countries against people of Middle Eastern extraction and persons of the Islamic faith, with public harassment, damage and destruction of mosques, beatings, and even murders reported in the media. Even when there is no violence, the threat is ever present, and this threat and the accompanying fear rob oppressed people of freedom, dignity, and peace of mind.

Unconscious Acts of Aversion and Avoidance

It is probably true today that theories and ideologies of superiority do not

exercise the influence in society that they once did. After much struggle on the parts of all subordinate groups there is a formal commitment in most Western democracies to some sense of equality, as evidenced by civil rights and human rights codes and legislation regarding affirmative action, equal pay, and other policies of equal treatment. And, as Young (1990: 132) notes:

> Commitment to formal equality for all persons tends also to support a public etiquette that disapproves of speech and behavior calling attention in public settings to a person's sex, race, sexual orientation, class status, religion, and the like. . . . The ideal promoted by current social etiquette is that these group differences should not matter in our everyday encounters with one another.

This is not to say that committed racists, sexists, and so on are relics of the past, but such people must be more careful today of how and when and where they exhibit overt acts of oppression and prejudice. Many (maybe most) acts of oppression at the personal level today are not of the open and aggressive type but occur as aversive behaviour that emerges in everyday interactions between persons in dominant and subordinate groups. In other words, much oppressive behaviour at the personal level has gone underground. Hostility, fear, avoidance, and feelings of superiority are expressed by dominant group members in mundane contexts of interaction in terms of their gestures, speech, tone of voice, and body movements (Brittan and Maynard, 1984). For example, dominant group members may show that they are uncomfortable or nervous around persons of a subordinate group by avoiding eye contact, increasing the physical distance between them, using kinetic gestures of defence and aversion, or going out of their way to avoid interaction or sharing the same approximate space.

It is not uncommon, for example, for men to be nervous around a group of women, or for white people to cross the street when they see two or more black people coming down the street towards them. It is not unusual for a loving heterosexual couple to recoil in horror upon seeing a gay or lesbian couple displaying the very same affectionate behaviour that they themselves display, or for a black person to be followed around a store by security people, or for people to shout at and talk in baby terms to an older person, or for the noise level in a room of white people to diminish when a person of colour enters, or for a salesperson to look at and address the male partner of a couple, only asking the woman what she thinks about the colour of the car or the kitchen in a house that is being shown to them.

Rather than overt sexism, racism, and so on, the above are examples of covert acts of oppression or of oppression having gone underground. Many members of the dominant group exhibiting these aversive and unconscious acts would deny that they are prejudiced or that they acted in an oppressive way. In fact, many of these same people may be consciously committed to equality and respect for members of all social groups. This shows how entrenched sexism, racism, ageism, classism, and the like are in our individual, collective, and cultural psyches, and why unconscious oppression is so difficult to counteract and eradicate. Unlike explicit acts of aggression and exclusion, acts of aversion and avoidance

cannot be legislated against. There is no legal or policy remedy to this kind of oppression.

Effects of Oppression on the Individual

Thus far, this chapter has looked at acts of oppression that occur at the personal level, that is, those acts of aversion or avoidance directed specifically (though not necessarily intentionally) at subordinate group members personally by dominant group members. The remainder of this chapter discusses the impact and effects of oppression on the individual who is oppressed. Of course, oppression at any level (personal, cultural, or structural) is felt eventually by subordinate persons at the individual level. In effect, what exists is a three-headed monster (i.e., personal, cultural, and structural forms of oppression) that treats subordinate groups in an inhumane, unjust, and discriminatory manner. The oppressed person experiences the full impact of multiple-level oppression every day. Therefore, questions to be addressed here include: How does oppression affect one's identity or sense of self? How does it impact on one's sense of location in society? And what effect does it have on the individual's self-esteem and other facets of the personal psyche?

Impact on Identity

Oppression at the personal level reinforces the privileged social position of the dominant group and the disadvantaged position of the subordinate group in a number of ways. First, the group identity of the subordinate group is defined by the dominant group and subordinate group members have no say in this definition. It is imposed on them, marking them as different and inferior—as the Other, and there is no escape from it because the behaviour and reactions of members of the dominant group and other subordinate groups (and members of one's own identity group in some cases) are constant reminders of it. Conversely, dominant groups have no need to think about their group identity because they occupy an unmarked, neutral, normative, and universal position (Young, 1990). The identity as inferior that is imposed on subordinate groups on a personal level is reinforced by the ways they are portrayed in the dominant culture, through the media, the education system, advertising, literature, movies, and so on, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

When members of subordinate groups experience aversive and avoidance behaviour from the dominant group they are reminded of their group identity and feel either marked (when the behaviour is aversive) or invisible (when the behaviour is avoidance) or not taken seriously or demeaned. This presents a double bind for them. They can either protest aversive or avoidance behaviour, or they can suffer its humiliation in silence. Because we live in a society where an aspect of the dominant culture is to avoid conflict and confrontation, it tends to be seen as tactless and in poor taste to draw attention to covert and often unintentional acts of racism, sexism, ageism, and so on. If a member of a subordinate group protests against such acts, it may lead to his or her exclusion from public or social events. As well, one who does protest against this kind of oppression is

often accused of being too sensitive, or making something out of nothing, or overreacting. Thus, the subordinate group member is left with the choice when experiencing oppressive behaviour of either suffering it in silence or protesting such behaviour and then being made to feel crazy.

The above, of course, begs the question, 'What is identity, what are its functions, and why is it so important?' 'Identity' is one of those loose and slippery terms with no universal agreement on its precise meaning. Breakwell (1986) says that what one theorist calls 'identity' another will call the 'self', even though both are attempting to understand the same fundamental phenomena. Some writers view identity to be one of a set (along with character, self-concept, personality, status) of social, psychological, and behavioural characteristics that differentiate one person from another. Breakwell points out that one's theoretical orientation will largely determine the meaning one gives to identity. For example, in the psychoanalytic tradition identity is a global awareness (i.e., awareness of oneself in relation to others) achieved through crisis and sequential identifications in social relations; the behaviourist talks in terms of personality; the symbolic interactionist might talk of the self-concept; and to the role theorist identity is any label applied consistently to a person. The concept of identity adopted here is social-psychological, and links socio-political with intrapsychic phenomena in the belief that both contribute to the establishment of or changes to one's identity or identities. In other words, this concept of identity focuses on the dialectical relationship between social context and personal psychology and considers how they both contribute to a person's identity.

There is a voluminous psychological literature on identity and no attempt will be made here to summarize it. Instead, a selection of ideas, which are consistent with a social-psychological perspective of identity, will be presented. It is hoped that these ideas will contribute to an understanding of what an identity is; how oppression affects identity; what some of the negative intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences are for oppressed persons of having a negative identity; and how they might respond on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup levels.

Structure of Identity

In its simplest terms, identity refers to the conditions or distinguishing features that mark or characterize or identify an individual. A person may be identified by his or her name, history, present social status, gender, race, personality, age, appearance (height, weight, etc.), religion, and so on. Some of these identity characteristics are obviously associated with one's physical being; others are invisible (e.g., sexual orientation, religion); still others are psychological (e.g., personality); and yet others are social characteristics (e.g., class) or social roles (e.g., parent, academic).

Obviously, many factors contribute to identity. In fact, 'identity' is probably an inaccurate or incorrect term as each of us has many identities. Each of the above markers or identity characteristics may constitute an identity in itself. For example, *part* of my identity to those who know me or know of me is that of a male. However, for people who do not know me but see me on the street my *total*

identity may be that of a male, or at least a white male. This point touches on the legitimate concern of postmodernists—that we should not assume that individuals have only one identity. Each component of identity may be considered to be an identity in itself, or what some writers refer to as a 'sub-identity'. These characteristics or defining properties of identity (or sub-identities) are known in the literature as the *content* of identity (ibid.). Even though many of these characteristics are shared with other people, the particular constellation or configuration attached to a person makes that person distinctive and gives him or her a unique overall identity. It should be noted that the contents of identity are not static. The characteristics of identity will shift in relation to each other according to the *context* in which the identity is located.

My Shifting Identity

While living in Australia I found myself emphasizing my Canadianness more than I ever did living in Canada. Similarly, when I was attending university in central Canada in the late 1970s, I had emphasized (some would say overemphasized) my 'Atlantic Canadianness'. Waddell and Cairns (1986) explain such shifts in emphasis as being determined by different situations or contexts. That is, identity components (or sub-identities) will be highly relevant or emphasized in one context (e.g., my being Canadian in Australia) and irrelevant or inappropriate to emphasize in other contexts (e.g., my being Canadian in Canada).

In addition to the contents of identity not being static, Breakwell points out that the organization of the contents are not static either. Some people will have a relatively fixed hierarchy of identity components while others will have no level of fixed connectedness among the characteristics of their identities. Although it is not known exactly what causes this variation, to some extent the organization of components must depend on the value attached to them. The *content* dimension is one part of the structure of identity. The *value* dimension is the other. A positive or negative value attached to each component of identity is based on current social beliefs and values in interaction with previously established value codes (ibid.). And, of course, those components that have a positive value attached to them correspond highly with the identity characteristics of the dominant group, whereas the negatively valued identity components tend to be associated with subordinate groups. Although the value attached to various contents of identity is socially determined, the powerful and dominant group largely determines the value and, as argued in Chapter 2, they do this in a way that protects and reproduces their privileged social position.

The individual learns his or her social and personal worth through interactions with others in the context of dominant ideologies. And, as Tajfel (1981) reminds

us, the determination of self-worth or social worth cannot occur free from stereotypes. This is not to say that an absolute systems determination of values occurs, for self-reflection and evaluation may lead to a rejection of current dominant social values. There should be no assumption that identity is without agency—an important point for anti-oppressive practice. However, the tendency is for dominant ideologies to influence the individual's choice of personal values and beliefs about one's identity and its value.

Any viable exploration of identity must differentiate between *personal identity* and *social identity*. The latter is that part of the self-concept derived from group associations, interpersonal relationships, and social position or status, whereas the former is free of such role or relationship determinants (Breakwell, 1986). There is considerable disagreement in the psychological literature about the relationship between these two concepts and whether or not the person does experience or can differentiate between both types or aspects of identity. The position taken here is that personal identity is how the person views him or herself, whereas social identity is how society or the world surrounding the person views him or her. As mentioned above and argued in more detail below, how society views (and responds to) the individual will have an effect on, but not necessarily totally determine, how the individual views him or herself. With respect to the question of whether or not the individual experiences both types of identity and/or can differentiate between them, the history of oppression and oppressed persons answers this question in the affirmative.

Oppressed persons learn early in their lives how society views and treats them, and throughout their lives this learning is reinforced. The (dominant or subordinate) individual actively accommodates to and assimilates portraits of the self supplied by the social world. When one's personal identity matches the negative portrait or social identity provided by the social world, then we have a case of internalized oppression. When there is incongruence between the personal identity and social identity of a subordinate person, there is also potential for resistance and change. In the case of incongruence between both sets of identities, however, there is also the likelihood of uncertainty, insecurity, guilt, and anguish on the oppressed person's part—and this must be confronted before any efforts at social change can occur.

Processes of Identity Formation

Consistent with the social-psychological approach (and with phenomenological and historical materialist philosophies and critical social theory), identity is the process and product of an individual's interactions with influences in the physical and social worlds. These influences include, among others, one's history, one's family, and the dominant ideology at the particular point of history in which the individual is going through the process of identity formation. For example, many people who experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s are still influenced by this event in their current lives, as evidenced by an extreme caution and frugality with money and purchases. Part of our identity is our history and culture—who we are, where we came from, the social status and other

characteristics of our family and/or social group. The family is a significant determinant of identity because it is the actual location in which people are socialized in the first instance and learn about their place in the world, how to behave in it, and what to expect from it based on personal and family characteristics. The dominant ideology of a society, which is transmitted to the individual through interactions with others and through the dominant culture (see Chapter 4), identifies and legitimates an individual's position of dominance or subordination in society according to the person's class, gender, race, age, sexuality, and so on. Persons develop and internalize a picture of themselves, in large part, according to how society views them, which, in turn, is determined largely by ideology, stereotypes, myths, and ethnocentrism.

The notion that identity may totally be a product of dominant ideologies is, of course, overly simplistic and crudely deterministic. At any one time, the social context contains many competing ideologies or explanations of social events, conditions, relationships, and dynamics. In other words, the individual is presented with many competing and contradictory explanations and interpretations of social reality. There is no doubt that the dominant ideology will significantly influence the formation of one's identity, but it will not necessarily be the sole determinant of one's identity. The individual is not without agency. For Peter Leonard (1984) these contradictions provide the individual with choices and it is these choices that form part of the dialectic between the individual and the social order. The individual, on the one hand, is shaped, influenced, and penetrated by the social order—its institutions, ideologies, and social practices. On the other hand, the individual will mediate the conflicting messages and ideologies and engage in acts of resistance (often unconsciously) to the dominant ideology and attempt to change the social order. The individual both shapes and is shaped by the social order. Identity is both a social product and a social process.

Unfortunately, there is no satisfactory or comprehensive explanation or theory of how choices among competing ideologies and contradictory messages are made by persons and incorporated into their structure of identity. Breakwell (1986) proposes three goals that are inherent in the identity process and that give it purpose and direction. The identity processes work to produce: (1) uniqueness or distinctiveness of identity for the individual; (2) continuity of identity across time and context; and (3) a feeling of personal worth and social value. There is little known about how these three relate to each other and it is obvious that there will be occasions where they conflict with one another. Apter (1983) would add a fourth goal to identity formation, which would also guide the processes of identity—the desire for autonomy. These goals suggest that a healthy identity is one that, at a minimum, has its own distinct nature and character; is relatively stable over time and in different social contexts; reflects a positive self-image on the part of the person and a sense of value to society; and allows the person to be self-determining and able to act with purpose on his or her own behalf.

It has already been argued that many or most members of subordinate or oppressed groups will not have healthy identities as defined by the above criteria. To be viewed and treated as second-class, sub-human, expendable, and the like

and to have an identity imposed by another group based on stereotypes and Eurocentric ideas and sentiments of an inferior Other does not facilitate the development of a healthy identity. In other words, oppression interferes with the development or maintenance of a healthy identity—and a healthy or strong sense of identity would seem to be essential for tackling one's oppression and oppressors. Building and strengthening identity would seem to be essential activities in an anti-oppressive social work practice.

Coping with Threats to Identity

As mentioned above, oppression presents a serious threat to the development or to the existence of a healthy identity. Because a healthy identity is part of what it is to be an autonomous and self-directing human, the individual will develop and employ coping strategies to protect his or her identity. A coping strategy is any action the individual believes will protect the self (i.e., physical, psychological, or social self). Breakwell (1986) outlines a number of coping mechanisms that operate at the intrapersonal or intrapsychic, interpersonal, and group (inter and intra) levels, with strategies at one level having repercussions for events at the other levels. These mechanisms may be recognized and intentional on the part of the individual or they may be employed unconsciously. They can have as their targets: (1) the removal of certain (material or ideological) aspects of the social context that contain threat; (2) the movement of the person into a different social position that is not as threatening; and (3) the revision of the content or value dimensions of identity structure. Although an overview of each coping mechanism is well beyond the scope of this book, a brief overview of the levels at which these coping mechanisms occur is presented below.

Intrapsychic coping mechanisms operate at the cognitive and emotional levels rather than at the action level, although they have implications for action. There are a number of groups of intrapsychic strategies; (1) those that deflect the implications of the threats to identity; (2) those that accept the threat as real and attempt to modify parts of one's identity to escape from or reduce it; and (3) those that re-evaluate and change (excising part of or adding to) the contents of identity because one or more aspects of the identity may engender threats. *Interpersonal* coping strategies rely on changing relationships with others to cope with threats. Examples are isolating oneself from others and its opposite strategy, negativism, where the person confronts anyone who threatens his or her identity structure. *Group* coping strategies include joining a number of different groups simultaneously to ameliorate the threat or stigma of being a member of one's identity group only. Another group strategy is to come together with others who are experiencing the same threat or form of oppression (either as an information-exchange group or a self-help group). A different version of some of these coping mechanisms is presented below.

Effects of Oppression on the Psychological Functioning of the Oppressed Person

Moane (1999), in reviewing a series of studies, found that oppression negatively

affects psychological functioning because it leads to a loss of personal identity (discussed above), a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation and isolation, and guilt or ambivalence. A discussion of some of these effects of oppression is presented below.

Positivist psychological literature claims that self-esteem is positively related to one's identity as a dominant group member and negatively related to one's identity as a subordinate group member. However, Adam (1978) points out a number of problems with such findings. First, measures of 'general self-esteem' often run aground in a conceptual fog. All assume a universal absolute standard of esteem and anxiety and ignore the general level of anxiety tolerance of the group of which the individual is a member. Heightened insecurity may be normal in a particular context. For example, one study (Powell, 1973, cited in Adam, 1978) found higher self-esteem among black citizens in a southern US city with a large black population, a historically black university, a militant student population, and an active desegregation program than among a small ghettoized black population in a northern city with a conservative Protestant majority and an apathetic city administration. Second, exclusive focus on psychological states incorrectly equalizes their macro-social conditions. For example, McCarthy and Yancey (1971) and Rosenberg and Simmons (1971) found that many of the studies carried out in the 1960s, which compared black and white levels of self-esteem, ignored the white hegemony of earning a living, going to school, reading, watching television, participating in the consumer society, and so on. Finally, such measures ignore the situationality of the phenomenon because they are based on the concept of a unitary, fixed, or essential identity. A black person's personal self-esteem and his or her racial self-esteem, for example, may differ dramatically, and the self-esteem among black people ranges from high to low levels.

What the self-esteem studies are likely reflecting is the fact that a subordinate person's social environment is one where insecurity is normal. Lack of control over one's destiny and the unpredictability of one's world contribute to a general insecurity, anxiety, fear, and restlessness. Black children, for example, perceive their environments as more threatening than do white children (Baughman, 1971, cited in Adam, 1978). The gay or lesbian person does not know what to expect from family, friends, and workmates if and when he or she 'comes out'. The verbal bashing of poor people and social assistance programs by bourgeois politicians and the mainstream media contributes to unrest and worry among people in receipt of financial assistance. The objective insecurity of members of subordinate groups is often mirrored in a heightened sense of personal insecurity and anxiety (Adam, 1978). This may lead to lowered self-esteem, but it may not. And, if it does, it may not mean lower self-esteem in every area of the subordinate person's psyche.

Another psychological effect of oppression referred to above is that members of subordinate groups will often assume ambivalence or guilt for the systemically constricted life chances available to them. The post-colonial revolutionary and writer, Frantz Fanon (1967: 139), says, 'All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that

I am no good.' Oppressed persons will often ask themselves, 'What have I (or my identity group) done to attract the hostilities of society?' In the absence of anything obvious on which to blame the oppressive situation, coupled with the continuous message from the dominant group that he or she and other similar people are ugly, degenerate, and morally inferior, the subordinate person will often blame him or herself. Women who are sexually assaulted may ask, 'What did I do to bring on this assault?' Black parents will teach their children not to do anything to attract negative attention and then berate their children when they are harassed or beaten even if these attacks have been unprovoked. Concentration camp victims often acquired profound guilt about events completely beyond their control. Gay and lesbian persons may suffer enormous guilt (especially in disappointing their parents), given religious teachings that homosexuality is an abomination and, until recently, its classification by the medical establishment as a mental illness (Greenberg, 1988). Suffering, it seems, permits the growth of guilt. Suffering may be experienced as 'guilt anxiety' rather than social injustice. Over time it develops a logic of its own in that it emerges as an ingrained, reflexive mechanism to cope with oppression (Adam, 1978). Sometimes it is easier to accept blame and punish oneself for something one did (but in reality did not do) than to believe that the hostile environment is due to who you are and beyond one's control. In this way, social order is assured.

Alienation is another outcome of oppression. In fact, Bulhan (1985: 186) argues that it is the key to understanding oppression: 'there is hardly a concept as pertinent to the situation of oppression as alienation.' It has a long history and has gone through many reformulations, most notably by Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx. Bulhan argues that it is a dynamic concept with synthesizing power. It not only relates experience to social conditions; it also entails a critique. And, consistent with critical social theory, this critique implies a solution. Marx's concept of alienation is probably the best known. Marx argued that capitalism resulted in the alienation of the worker and that this alienation had four aspects. The first was the worker's alienation from the product of his or her labour, which, according to Meszaros (1970), meant alienation from that which mediates the worker's relationship to the external world and hence to the objects of nature. The second aspect of Marx's concept of alienation was the worker's alienation from him or herself because the worker is coerced, controlled, and regimented and, therefore, derives no intrinsic satisfaction from work activities. The worker is alienated from his or her own activity, which is also alienation from his or her body, mind, and spirit, which, taken together, constitute the self. The third aspect refers to alienation from human essence as the worker is denied realization of his or her inherent human potential through work activity. The final aspect of Marx's concept of alienation is alienation from other people in that capitalism divides society into antagonistic classes (owners and workers) to the point where degradation and violence ensue (Bulhan, 1985).

Obviously, Marx's concept of alienation is that of 'alienated labour' and his focus was on economic and class oppression. Fanon (1967), the black Algerian psychiatrist, revolutionary, and intellectual, adopted alienation as a central and

synthesizing concept. Bulhan, in his book on Fanon and his ideas, points out that although Fanon was greatly influenced by the Marxian formulation of alienation, as a psychiatrist he was interested in a psychological perspective of the concept. As well, his exposure to existentialism (he was a personal friend of Jean-Paul Sartre), phenomenology, and psychoanalysis enriched his perspective on alienation. His reformulation of the concept of alienation, which occurred in a developmental way over years of observing and experiencing colonization first-hand and gathering clinical data, emphasized some variables (i.e., cultural and psychological) more than others (i.e., economic and class).

Bulhan outlines Fanon's concept of alienation, which contains five aspects: (1) alienation from the 'self' or from one's corporality and personal identity; (2) alienation from 'significant others', that is, from one's family and group; (3) alienation from the 'general other', illustrated by the violence and paranoia characterizing relations between the white colonizers and black colonized; (4) alienation from one's 'culture' or from one's language and history; and (5) alienation from 'creative praxis', which involves the denial and/or abdication of self-determined, socialized, and organized activity. Fanon's concept of alienation obviously contains more relevance for more groups of oppressed people than does that of Marx, as it extends alienation beyond class and economics. Fanon himself emphasized alienation from self and alienation from culture as the most significant aspects of alienation.

The following section looks at how oppressed persons might respond to oppression and its effects. However, an overview of the role of an anti-oppressive social worker in dealing with the above effects of oppression is left until the final two chapters.

Surviving Oppression: Responses of Oppressed People at the Personal Level

Frantz Fanon (1967, 1968) proposed a theory of identity development among oppressed people. Under conditions of prolonged oppression, Fanon presented three models of psychological defence and identity development: the first involved a pattern of compromise; the second, flight; and the third, fight. Bulhan (1985) developed these three models into stages of colonization (but they have relevance to most oppressed groups). Although the notion of stages is fraught with practical difficulties because it implies a linear track of progress (see the discussion in Chapter 8 on the limitations and dangers of adopting linear developmental models), Bulhan's model sheds some light on the shifting relationship between oppressed people and their oppressors. The first stage (capitulation) involves an identification on the part of the oppressed with the oppressor, which results in increased assimilation into the dominant culture along with a simultaneous rejection of one's own culture. The second stage (revitalization) sees a reactive repudiation of the dominant culture and a defensive romanticization of the subordinate (or indigenous culture in post-colonial terms). The third stage (radicalization) is characterized by synthesis and an unambiguous commitment to radical change.

Adam (1978) outlines a similar model of responses made to oppression. He presents two major sets of responses that oppressed people may make with respect to their lived oppression: (1) accommodation and compliance through a process of accepting one's externally imposed inferior status; or (2) rejection through a process of collective resistance and a politics of difference (Adam, 1978; Young, 1990). Although presented here in binary form, some oppressed persons may adopt both sets of responses and shift from one to the other depending on the context. Accommodative responses are discussed below, while rejection of inferior status and resistance are considered in Chapters 5 and 8. It should be noted that although the responses that seem to reflect an inferiority on the part of subordinate persons are outlined here, the concept and various theories or explanations of 'internalized oppression' comprise the subject material of Chapter 6.

The point has been made previously that members of oppressed groups are defined by the dominant group in ways that often devalue, objectify, and stereotype them as different, deviant, or inferior. Their own experiences and interpretation of social life find little expression that touches the dominant culture (Young, 1990). Because they find themselves reflected in literature, the media, formal education, and so forth either not at all or in a highly distorted fashion, they often will suffer an impoverished identity (Adam, 1978). The paradox of this situation for oppressed populations is that at the same time they are rendered invisible by the dominant group they are also marked as different.

This lack of a strong self-identity will, in many cases, lead to an internalization of the dominant group's stereotyped and inferiorized images of subordinate populations (Young, 1990). This internalized oppression, in turn, will cause some oppressed people to act in ways that affirm the dominant group's view of them as inferior people and, consequently, will lead to a process of inferiorized persons reproducing their own oppression. Through a process of cultural and ideological hegemony many oppressed people believe that if they cannot make it in our society, that if they are experiencing problems, then it is their own fault because they are unable to take advantage of the opportunities that the dominant group says are available to everyone. It is, as Paulo Freire (1994) said, as if the oppressor gets in the head of the oppressed. People understand their interests in ways that reflect the interests of the dominant group.

When people internalize their oppression, blaming themselves for their troubled circumstances, they will often contribute to their own oppression by considering it as unique, unchangeable, deserved, or temporary (Adam, 1978), or they may blame other significant people in their lives, such as parents or family. Oppressed persons often contribute to their own oppression also by psychologically or socially withdrawing or engaging in other self-destructive behaviours, thereby causing them to be rejected by others. This, in turn, confirms the low image they may have of themselves (Moreau and Leonard, 1989). The radical psychiatric movement of the 1970s considered all alienation to be the result of oppression about which oppressed people have been mystified or deceived. That is, the oppressed person is led to believe that he or she

is not oppressed or that there are good reasons for his or her oppression (Agel, 1971).

Paulo Freire (1994) discusses several positions that oppressed people may adopt that either reinforce or contribute to their own oppression. Fatalism may be expressed by the oppressed about their situation—'There is nothing I can do about it' and 'It is God's will' are common expressions of fatalism. However, this fatalistic attitude is often interpreted as docility or apathy by the oppressor, which reinforces the dominant group's view of the oppressed as lazy, inferior, and getting all that they deserve. Horizontal violence often occurs among oppressed people whereby one Aboriginal person, for example, may strike out at another for petty reasons, which again reinforces the negative images held by the dominant class of subordinate groups. Self-depreciation also occurs when a group hears so often that they are good for nothing that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. Moreau and Leonard (1989) and Adam (1978) call this process 'inferiorization'. Another characteristic of some oppressed persons is that they feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his or her way of life, which is rather similar to the Stockholm Syndrome, whereby hostages over time often come to feel affection and even admiration for their captors. This affirms, of course, the belief that oppression is legitimate and that it is more desirable to oppress than to be oppressed.

It must be noted that such responses are not irrational on the part of those oppressed persons who use them. Although they may appear to be peculiar, unnatural, or neurotic, they are actually rational coping mechanisms employed in everyday life to lessen the suffering of oppression. Their irrationality lies in the fact that they also function to sustain domination. Adam (1978) identified seven such responses. An overview of each follows.

1. *Mimesis.* One response to oppression is for a member of a particular oppressed group to mimic or imitate the behaviours and attitudes that the dominant group displays towards that group in an attempt to gain a slightly more privileged status. For example, the harshest critics of the non-working poor often are the working poor (who repeat all the punitive and moralistic accusations held by the dominant group), even though both groups suffer the oppression associated with poverty. Similarly, an organized women's group in Canada called 'REAL Women' has been unrelenting in its attack on the efforts of the women's movement to obtain more gender equality in society, and 'Uncle Tom' black persons who are given positions of authority over other black persons not infrequently treat their subordinates as inferiors rather than as compatriots.

Each oppressed group has a small class of converts and apologists who assist the dominant group in the preservation of the status quo by conforming to the values of their 'masters'. Impressed with the small privileges that go with their 'borrowed status', they savour these privileges and will often defend them with fear and harshness. Over time, the converts often will identify more with the dominant group than with their own community, thus presenting it with a chronic threat or destabilizing force from within.

2. *Escape from identity.* To avoid or ease the burdens of oppression some

inferiorized persons will attempt to escape from the 'composite portrait' (with its accompanying range of social penalties) used by the dominant group to define their particular place in society. Although this may be regarded as neurotic behaviour in that one cannot escape from what one is (or is constructed to be), to the person attempting to flee from his or her identity, escape from one's identity is viewed as an attempt to move into another social category—one that has fewer social penalties attached to it. However, escaping one's identity isolates the individual from others in the same subordinate group by denying or not recognizing that one is a member of that group. Examples are Jews who convert to Christianity solely to escape their primary identity, gay and lesbian persons who enter into heterosexual marriages to be socially accepted, and women who associate exclusively with men.

Escape from identity, like other inferiorized responses to oppression, functions as a form of false consciousness that subordinates the person to the rationality of oppression. As well, it successfully isolates the person from others who share the same form of oppression. This false consciousness and fragmentation of oppressed people serve to maintain the status quo with respect to dominant-subordinate relations in society.

3. *Psychological withdrawal.* Oppressed persons may adopt a cautious, low-profile conservatism as a way of decreasing their visibility (and social penalties) and compensating for a disfavoured identity. Overly visible behaviour (even though it may sometimes be deliberate acts of resistance to oppression) by fellow members may be strongly condemned because it gives the rest a bad name (for example, the 'loudmouthed' black, the 'pushy' Jew, or the 'swish' homosexual). An effort to reduce the hazards of a high-risk environment outweighs active resistance. This coping effort is often manifest in psychological responses such as passivity, lethargy, and submission. African Americans during the period of slavery and Jews in Nazi concentration camps often exhibited these psychological characteristics. Obviously, psychological withdrawal reinforces rather than threatens the oppressive order.

4. *Guilt-expiation rituals.* Sacrifice is classically conceived as the destruction of a victim for purposes of maintaining or correcting a relationship with the 'sacred' order. Some oppressed persons will see the dominant order as sacred and immutable, and to atone for the guilt of not being able to become full-fledged members they will engage in certain conscious or unwitting guilt-expiation rituals. These rituals become manifest in certain self-mutilating alterations such as black people straightening their hair and lightening their skin, gay men acquiescing to aversive therapy such as extended electroshock treatment to atone for their imputed transgressions, and the ultimate self-sacrifice of suicide by Aboriginal persons (and others) as a guilt-ridden response to oppression.

5. *Magical ideologies.* Some oppressed people will see their situation with respect to the dominant group as so immutable that they will appeal to supernatural means as a way out of their oppressed condition, such as astrology, various superstitious beliefs, messianism, and even gambling. This appeal is made to someone or something else full of power and authority to fix what is wrong.

Internal blinders shield the person from confronting the real menace causing his or her inferiorized situation and lead the person on a search for a magical solution. For example, reading the astrology section of the daily newspaper may be an interesting and harmless pastime for many people, but some people will avoid taking action on troublesome life situations because they believe their destiny is determined solely by the stars. There is nothing that they can do about their oppression because their destiny rests with a force greater than themselves. Every day becomes a new search (in an astrological chart) for a sign that their travails will be (magically) alleviated or eliminated. This kind of fatalism is also found among many people who believe that everything in life is in God's hands and that no amount of human endeavour can change what Divine Providence has in store for them. Because the belief in these situations is that one's problems are determined by magical means or supernatural beings, then only a magical or supernatural solution can resolve them.

6. *In-group hostility.* Hierarchies provide a self-perpetuating dynamic that allows the dominated to console themselves through a comparison of yet more degraded people. It constructs what Adam (1978) calls a 'poor person's snobbery' that sets up a superior-inferior relationship among oppressed groups similar to that between dominant and subordinate groups. It can occur on an inter-group basis, as in the case of members of the white working class oppressing black people, or within an oppressed group, such as closet gay people ridiculing homosexuals or light-skinned black people treating their more dark-skinned compatriots with disdain. In this way the dynamics of oppression are reproduced by dominated groups themselves.

7. *Social withdrawal.* Social withdrawal is a coping strategy in which the oppressed person externalizes identity conflict into the immediate social environment. The oppressed person will develop repertoires of behaviours for different audiences. That is, he or she will behave in one way when in contact with the dominant group (usually assuming a low profile to escape attention) and another way when in contact with their own subordinated community (in a way that affirms with others their true identity). Social withdrawal does not challenge or negate the dominant view of the oppressed group as it is a means to placate the powerful other. For example, black parents will often advise their children to avoid (withdraw from) confrontation with the dominant white society as a means of coping with harassment. In effect, this behaviour contributes to a strategy of invisibility, but it also supports the dominant view that black people are by nature servile and passive.

The other side of social withdrawal is that it permits the first move towards reconciliation with other members of one's subordinate group. As the oppressed individual withdraws from the dominant group by acts of compliance and enters into communication with other members of the subordinated community, the individual may discover his or her identity with them. That is, they become acquainted with their identity as defined by their own group, as opposed to that identity that has been defined and imposed by the dominant group. A dialectical movement towards integration occurs as community

members discover each other and, in the process, discover themselves. Although the discovery of self and community requires some degree of social withdrawal from an inhospitable social environment controlled by the dominant group, the danger is that it may lead to ghettoization, which, though safe from the dominant group, is also stifling and confining for the oppressed person. The ghetto or haven is a response to oppression and potentially a first assertion of community. It has the potential for developing a more genuine identity—a sense of community, solidarity, and confidence—so that members are able to assert their authentic identity and differences in ways that contravene the prevailing rationality of the dominant group.

Social withdrawal opens up the possibility of resistance to dominating power. As noted in Chapter 1, Foucault (1988) argued that power and resistance are implicated in each other—that power and oppression are never exercised without insubordination and obstinacy, that is without resistance. Resistance is the inevitable and pervasive counterpart of oppression. It can occur on an individual or collective basis. As such, social withdrawal holds the potential for consciousness-raising, community-building, and mobilization against oppressive structures, cultures, and practices. More will be said about using acts of resistance as strategies to confront and challenge oppression in Chapter 8.

Critical Social Theory and Personal Oppression

In Chapter 1 it was stated that the treatment of oppression/anti-oppression in this book would be grounded in critical social theory in general and in the conflict perspective of society in particular. Such theory explains social problems to be the result of contests or conflicts between various social groups, with a dominant group controlling most of society's resources and possessing most of the economic and political power. Society is organized to the benefit of this group (mainly bourgeois males of European descent) and is held together, not by consensus, but by the differential control of resources and power. Social structures, processes, and practices are established by the dominant group and favour its members while oppressing others along lines of class, race, gender, age, sexuality, and so on. In other words, dominant groups enjoy their privilege at the expense of subordinate groups by way of a set of unjust social conditions and a system of oppressive social relations (Gil, 1998).

But how is modern-day oppression carried out and sustained? Critical social theory answers this question in general terms by arguing that oppression is structural—that people's everyday lives are affected by politics, economics, culture, discourse, social practices, gender, race, and so on. It also argues that structures of oppression are reproduced through the internalization (by both oppressors and oppressed) of dominant-subordinate relations. The practical mission of critical social theory is to translate its developed understandings of domination, exploitation, and oppression into a political (anti-oppressive) practice of social transformation whereby society is free from these phenomena. Thus, a crucial task for critical social theory is to locate actual practices of domination wherever they occur, that is, at the personal, cultural, and structural levels.

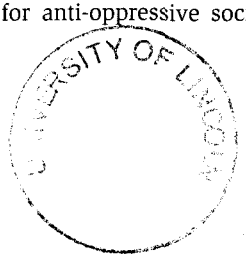
Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this chapter to critique dominant-subordinate relations at the personal level and to locate those social practices of oppression that occur in everyday personal interactions between members of dominant and subordinate groups. The dominant group is able to mark the body of the Other as ugly and degenerate. Furthermore, this inferior body type becomes an indication of an intellectually and morally inferior character. These socially constructed differences are then used by the dominant group as the bases and rationale not only for appropriating most of society's resources and political influence but for carrying out acts of prejudice and discrimination against subordinate group members. Such acts can be either conscious and aggressive or, more likely today, unconscious and aversive. Unconscious and aversive acts of oppression are much more difficult to contravene since, given their nature, they seldom can be legislated against.

The effects of these acts of oppression at the personal level on oppressed persons include the imposition of an identity by the dominant group that is often stereotyped, essentialist, and inferior. It is also an identity in which the subordinate group had no say in its development or definition. On the surface, there appears to be no escape from this negative identity—subordinate group members are reminded of it in their interactions with the dominant group on a daily basis, and a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety invariably accompanies it. The politics of identity include a tendency to accept and internalize this socially constructed and imposed identity and to act in ways that reinforce the stereotypical identity in the eyes of the dominant group.

However, oppressed people can and do respond to their oppression. Some are compliant with and accommodating to their subordinate status while others resist oppression, yet it is not always a simple matter of distinguishing between the two. What may appear to be compliant behaviour to the observer may actually be a coping mechanism on the part of the subordinate person to protect him or her from some of the hurt all oppressed people often experience in their daily interactions with dominant group members. Or, it may be an act that resists the image or identity that the dominant group has defined and, instead, is a preliminary step towards defining one's own identity.

Critical social theory provides a useful framework for understanding oppression in all its complexity. However, to paraphrase Marx, it is not enough to understand an oppressive society—the task is to change it. And, as noted in Chapter 1, critical social theory has a practical or political component. One must be able to translate the critical analysis of a subject into a transformative political practice. The implications of the analysis here of dominant-subordinate relations at the personal level for anti-oppressive social work practice are presented in Chapter 8.



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