

WOCN Power and Privilege Packet

(Women of Color Network 2007)

DEFINITIONS

(Excerpted from Cultural Bridges and Michigan State University)

POWER: *Merriam Webster Dictionary* - Ability to act or produce an effect; legal or official authority, capacity, or right; possession of control, authority, or influence over others; a controlling group or [establishment](#) (a group of social, economic, and political leaders who form a ruling class or a controlling group)—often used in the phrase *the powers that be*; mental or moral efficacy; political control or influence

INSTITUTIONAL POWER: The ability or official authority to decide what is best for others. The ability to decide who will have access to resources. The capacity to exercise control over others.

PREJUDICE: A judgment or opinion that is formed on insufficient grounds before facts are known or in disregard of facts that contradict it. Prejudices are learned and can be unlearned.

STEREOTYPE: An exaggerated or distorted belief that attributes characteristics to members of a particular group, simplistically lumping them together and refusing to acknowledge differences among members of the group.

OPPRESSION: The combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called “target groups”) and benefits other groups (often called “dominant groups”). Examples of these systems are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and anti-Semitism. These systems enable dominant groups to exert control over target groups by limiting their rights, freedom, and access to basic resources such as health care, education, employment, and housing.

Four Levels of Oppression/“isms” and Change:

- **Personal:** Values, Beliefs, Feelings
- **Interpersonal:** Actions, Behaviors, Language
- **Institutional:** Rules, Policies, Procedures
- **Cultural:** Beauty, Truth, Right

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Prejudice

(A pre-judgment based on myth, missing info, mis-information/lies or stereotypes of particular cultural or social group.)

+ Power

(Social, Cultural, Economic power)

= Oppression

(A system of structured dis-equality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges and benefits of the society are available to individuals according to their presumed membership in social identity groups. This system is supported and reinforced by the power structure (money, military, police, etc.)

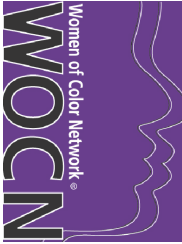
Excerpted from Cultural Bridges

PRIVILEGE: Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels and gives advantages, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of target groups. In the United States, privilege is granted to people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups:

- White people;
- Able-bodied people;
- Heterosexuals;
- Males;
- Christians;
- Middle or owning class people;
- Middle-aged people;
- English-speaking people

Privilege is characteristically invisible to people who have it. People in dominant groups often believe that they have earned the privileges that they enjoy or that everyone could have access to these privileges if only they worked to earn them. In fact, privileges are unearned and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not, and regardless of their stated intent.

Unlike targets of oppression, people in dominant groups are frequently unaware that they are members of the dominant group due to the privilege of being able to see themselves as persons rather than stereotypes.



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TARGETS OF OPPRESSION: Targets of oppression are members of social identity groups that are disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized in a variety of ways by agents of oppression and the agent's systems or institutions. Targets of oppression are subject to containment, having their choices and movements restricted and limited, are seen and treated as expendable and replaceable, without an individual identity apart from their group, and are compartmentalized into narrowly defined roles.

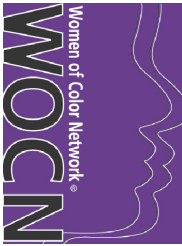
Targets of oppression are people subjected to exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Targets of oppression are kept in their place by the agent of oppression's ideology, which supports oppression by denying that it exists and blames the conditions of oppression on actions of the targets.

Targets of oppression have fewer "life chances" or benefits as a result of their membership in a particular social group. As examples, there is a higher likelihood that African American males will be arrested than Caucasian males; there is a greater chance that males will have a higher salary than females; and there is a higher probability that persons using a wheelchair for mobility will have fewer job opportunities than non-disabled people.

AGENTS OF OPPRESSION: Agents of oppression are members of the dominant social groups in the United States, privileged by birth or acquisition, which knowingly or unknowingly exploit and reap unfair advantage over members of groups that are targets of oppression. Agents of oppression are also trapped by the system of institutionalized oppression that benefits them and are confined to roles and prescribed behaviors. In United States culture, agents have the power to define the "norm" for what is reality and they see themselves as normal or proper, whereas targets are likely to be labeled as deviant, evil, abnormal, substandard, or defective.

RACE: "Race is a pigment of our imagination". That is a clever way of saying that race is actually an invention. It is a way of arbitrarily dividing humankind into different groups for the purpose of keeping some on top and some at the bottom; some in and some out. And its invention has very clear historical roots; namely, colonialism. "Race is an arbitrary socio-biological classification created by Europeans during the time of world wide colonial expansion, to assign human worth and social status, using themselves as the model of humanity, for the purpose of legitimizing white power and white skin privilege" (*Crossroads-Interfaith Ministry for Social Justice*).

To acknowledge that race is a historical arbitrary invention does not mean that it can be, thereby, easily dispensed with as a reality in people's lives. To acknowledge race as an



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invention of colonialism is not the same as pretending to be color-blind or declaring, “I don’t notice people’s race!” Our world has been ordered and structured on the basis of skin color and that oppressive ordering and structuring is RACISM.

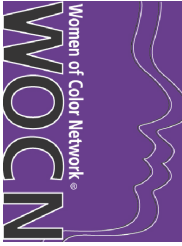
RACISM: Racism is a system in which one race maintains supremacy over another race through a set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures, and institutional power. Racism is a “system of structured dis-equality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges, and benefits of the society are available 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.

ALLY: An ally is a person whose commitment to dismantling oppression is reflected in a willingness to do the following:

- Educate oneself about oppression;
- Learn from and listen to people who are targets of oppression;
- Examine and challenge one’s own prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions;
- Work through feelings of guilt, shame, and defensiveness to understand what is beneath them and what needs to be healed;
- Learn and practice the skills of challenging oppressive remarks, behaviors, policies, and institutional structures;
- Act collaboratively with members of the target group to dismantle oppression.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION: The process whereby people in the target group make oppression internal and personal by coming to believe that the lies, prejudices, and stereotypes about them are true. Members of target groups exhibit internalized oppression when they alter their attitudes, behaviors, speech, and self-confidence to reflect the stereotypes and norms of the dominant group. Internalized oppression can create low self-esteem, self-doubt, and even self-loathing. It can also be projected outward as fear, criticism, and distrust of members of one’s target group.

GENDER: Refers to those rules, norms, customs, and practices by which biologically associated differences between the male and female of the human species are translated into socially constructed differences between men and women, boys and girls which give them unequal value, opportunities and life chances.



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“OPPRESSION” - Excerpts from article by Marilyn Frye, 1983

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped.

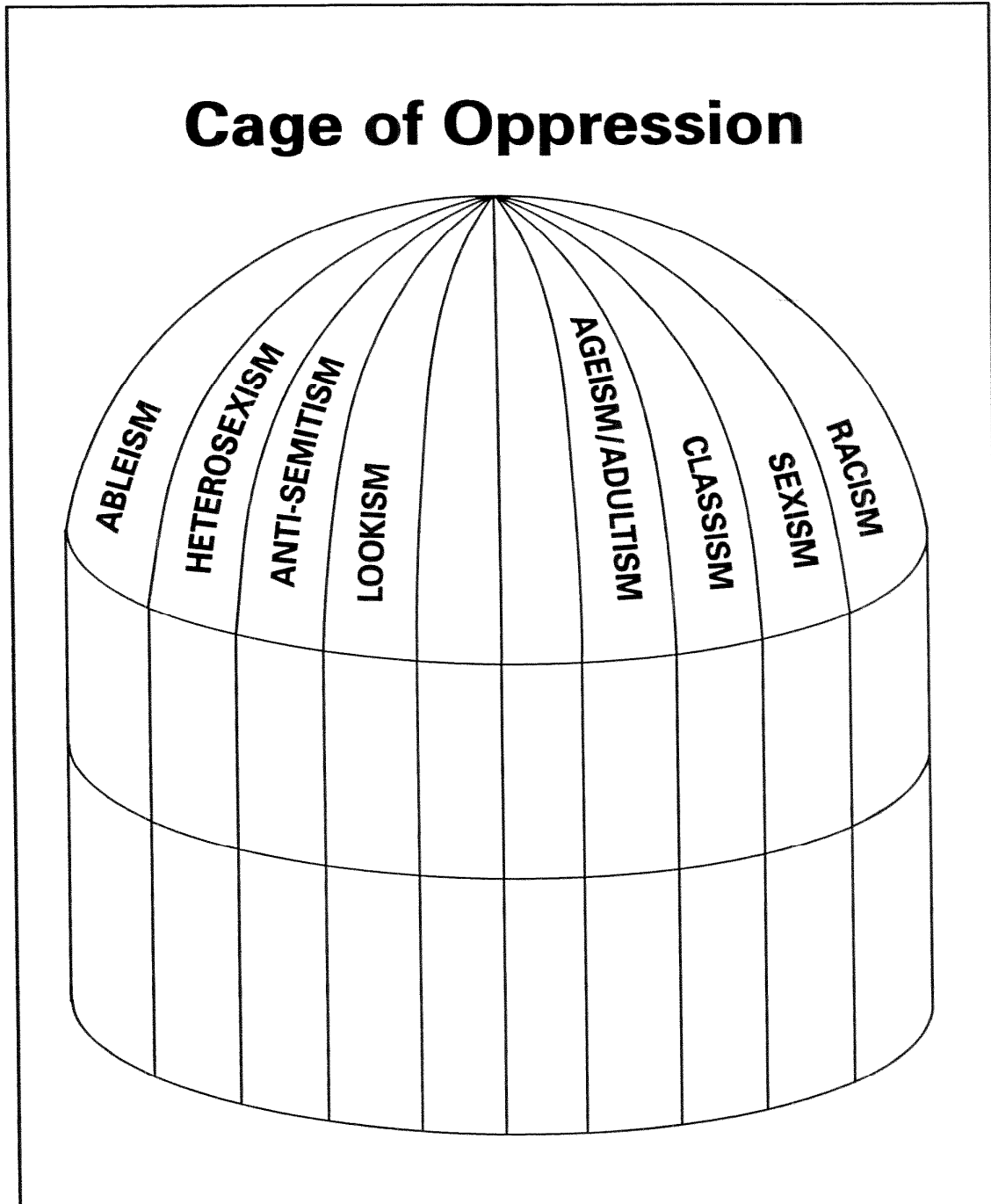
Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would give trouble going past the wires to get anywhere...

There is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere.

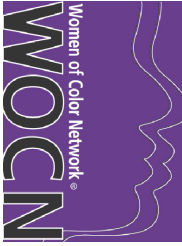
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CAGE OF OPPRESSION EXERCISE



Excerpted from Joan Olsson from Cultural Bridges

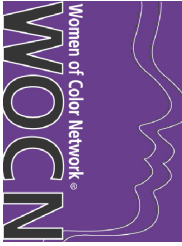


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How to Use the Cage of Oppression (Cultural Bridges):

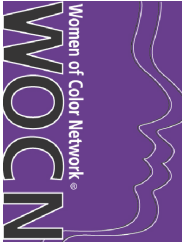
- Utilize the Cage of Oppression as a graphic image of how society is organized around identity. Consider this to be a macro view of how privilege, power and oppression operate and imprison us all.
- Across the top of the Cage are various forms of oppression or “isms”. Below it are two rows of “cells”. The top row, or floor, of cells is for those who have greater access to institutional or societal power and receive unearned, assigned privilege, or *agents of oppression*. The bottom row, or floor, of cells is for those who have the least access to power and privilege, or *targets of oppression*.
- **Activity:**
 - **Choose one of the ‘isms at the top of the Cage.** (*An example would be sexism*).
 - **Ask yourself: “This ‘ism is the oppression of a group of people based what?”** (*Continuing the example, this would be sex or gender*).
 - **Then ask yourself: “Which group has privilege based on sex or gender?”** (*Under the example, the answer would be men*). Write the name of this group into the top cell.
 - **Next, ask yourself: “Which group is a target of oppression based on sex or gender?”** (*Continuing the example, the answer would be women*). Write the name of this group into the bottom cell.
 - **Repeat these steps until you have finished the Cage. Feel free to insert additional ‘isms into the top of the Cage and fill in the top and bottom cell.**
 - **Finally, find yourself in the Cage. Place check marks next to all of the groups that you belong to based on your personal identity.**



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- Take Home Messages from the Cage:
 - The Cage shows the structured dis-equality of U.S. institutions and society, such as the denial of rights, benefits and responsibilities and system disempowerment of targeted groups, and the systemic benefitting of another group.
 - (1) Oppression is a social construction; (2) It is an inherited legacy, not our creation and therefore not our fault UNTIL NOW, therefore how we as society interact now what we do with the information once we learn about oppression is our responsibility; (3) Oppression is pervasive and impacts everyone; (4) Oppression is not earned and neither is privilege – both are “birthrights” that need to be challenged.
 - Current manifestations of oppression in the U.S. have their roots in historical, political and social context.
 - Horizontal oppression across target groups as well as vertical oppression between target and privilege groups can cause isolation, competition, suspicion and hostility across all.
 - We are all responsible to find our own places in the Cage; then note that our experience is of both privilege and oppression and, again, both need to be challenged.
 - EVERYONE is in the Cage both as privilege and target groups.
 - BUT the experience of those with target experiences relative to their identities is different than those with privilege experiences.
 - Some people have many more target identities than privilege identities, and some have more privilege identities than target identities. The experience for those with multiple target identities is, again, different than those with multiple identities of privilege.
 - It will take those who are privileged in different identities to join and help in the fight to dismantle the Cage – it is NOT only up to target groups to address this.



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BECOMING AN ALLY

Working Assumptions and Guidelines for Alliance-Building — By Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

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Since, under present world conditions, everyone either is now, or has been, or will be at some time a target of social oppression, and since everyone is now, or has been, or will be in a non-target group in relation to some other group's oppression, alliance-building is for everyone.

Everyone of us needs allies, and everyone of us can take the role of an ally for someone else. The following guidelines are based on this premise. They should be equally applicable from the perspective of the target and the non-target group.

STRATEGIES FOR WINNING ALLIES

1. Assume that you and all members of your group deserve allies.
2. Assume that your liberation issues are justifiably of concern to all people outside your group.
3. Assume that people in other groups are your natural allies; assume that all people outside your group want to be allies for you and that it is in their interest for them to do so.
4. Assume that it is only other people's own oppression and internalized oppression that prevents them (temporarily) from being effective allies to you at all times.



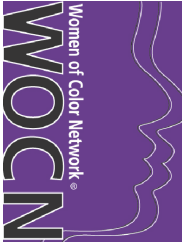
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5. Assume that your allies are doing the best they can at the present time, given their own oppression and internalized oppression. Assume that they can and will do better.
6. Assume that you are the expert on your own experience and that you have information which other people need to hear.
7. Speak from your own experience without comparing your oppression to theirs.
8. Assume that your experience is also an experience of victories; be sure to share these- as well as the stories of how things are hard.
9. Expect perfection from your allies; expect them to be able to deal with the "difficult issues" in your struggle. Assume that allies make mistakes; be prepared to be disappointed, and continue to expect the best from them.
10. Assume that you have a perfect right to assist your allies to become more effective for you. Assume that you can choose to do this at any time. Take full pride in your ability to do this.

STRATEGIES FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE ALLY

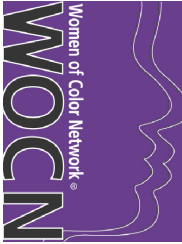
1. Assume that all people in your own group including yourself want to be allies to people in other groups. Assume that you are good enough and smart enough to be an effective ally. (This does not mean that you have nothing more to learn- see # 6, below.)
2. Assume that you have a perfect right to be concerned with other people's liberation issues, and that it is in your own interest to do so and to be an ally.



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3. Assume that all people in the target group want you and members of your group as allies. Assume that they recognize you as such- at least potentially.
4. Assume that any appearances to the contrary-(any apparent rejections of you as an ally) are the result of target group people's experience of oppression and internalized oppression.
5. Assume that people in the target group are already communicating to you in the best way they can at the present time. Assume that they can and will do better. Think about how to assist them in this without making your support dependent upon their "improving" in any way. (Hint: think about what has been helpful for you when you were in the target group position).
6. Assume that target group people are experts on their own experience, and that you have much to learn from them. Use your own intelligence and your own experience as a target group member to think about what the target group people might find useful.
7. Recognize that as a non-target person you are an expert on the experience of having been conditioned to take the oppressor role. This means that you know the content of the lies which target group people have internalized. Don't let timidity force you into pretended ignorance.
8. Assume that target group people are survivors and that they have a long history of resistance. Become an expert on this history and assist target group people to take full pride in it.
9. Become an expert on all the issues which are of concern to people in the target group, especially the issues which are most closely tied in to their internalized oppression. Assume that making mistakes is part of the learning process of being an ever more effective ally. Be prepared for flare-ups of



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- disappointment and criticism. Acknowledge and apologize for mistakes; learn from them, but don't retreat.
10. Recognize that people in the target group can spot "oppressor-role conditioning"; do not bother with trying to "convince" them that this conditioning did not happen to you. Don't attempt to convince target group people that you "are on their side"; just be there.
 11. Do not expect "gratitude" from people in the target group; thoughtfully interrupt if it is offered to you. Remember, being an ally is a matter of your choice. It is not an obligation; it is something you get to do.
 12. Be a 100% ally; no deals; no strings attached: "I'll oppose your oppression if you oppose mine." Everyone's oppression needs to be opposed unconditionally.



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PRIVILEGE

REMEMBER...

PRIVILEGE IS unearned.

PRIVILEGE IS not your fault.

PRIVILEGE IS having it whether you know it or not.

PRIVILEGE IS your responsibility.

PRIVILEGE IS not being able to give it back.

PRIVILEGE IS one of the best tools to dismantle oppression.

PRIVILEGE IS a systemic position of power.

PRIVILEGE IS systematically reinforced.

PRIVILEGE IS being able to define the norm.

PRIVILEGE IS not having to overcome the exhausting, wearing, debilitating effects of disprivilege.

PRIVILEGE IS taking it for granted.

PRIVILEGE IS not having to believe or understand the pain of the target group.

PRIVILEGE IS deciding you've heard enough of the target group's pain.

PRIVILEGE IS focusing on the pain of the privilege group.

PRIVILEGE IS defining what pain is.

PRIVILEGE IS POWER.

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