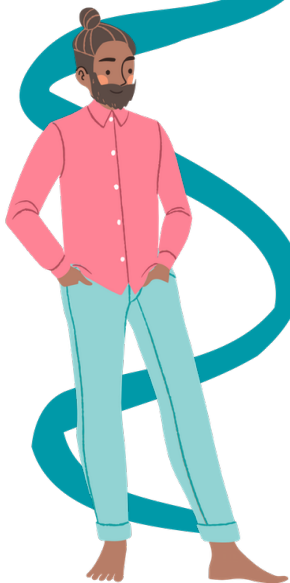


Chapter 5

GROUNDING IN AN ANTI- OPPRESSION FRAMEWORK¹



Oppression is different from prejudice or discrimination in that it consistently affects whole groups of people, not just individuals. It is a system upheld by institutions (such as: media, government, education, healthcare, religion), laws and policies, economic systems, and societal beliefs and norms.²

Oppression, in itself, is a form of trauma that is often complex and longstanding. Forms of oppression often intersect, creating compounding effects to those who are impacted (for more information on intersectionality, check out Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's work). Experiencing oppression impacts how people exist in the world, how they feel about themselves, and the access they have to resources to heal and thrive.

Why We Root Ourselves in Anti-Oppression Work

We are not, just as survivors are not, single-issue people. Audre Lorde said it best: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

We are all impacted by the ways our identities, cultures, and experiences interact with other forces in the world. To empower survivors, we must use a lens that enables us to see survivors as their whole selves, including how their experiences and options are impacted by systems of oppression.

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

Audre Lorde

Working within anti-oppression and trauma-informed frameworks also enables us to better understand how our own identities intersect with our work as advocates and change-makers. We must go beyond mitigating our own biases and consciously learn to accept and integrate the ideas of anti-oppression into our lives.

Rooting in anti-oppression work enables us to understand the systemic and societal barriers that both uphold sexual violence and make it difficult for survivors to seek support.

Oppression & Anti-Oppression

Marilyn Frye, American philosopher and radical feminist helps us envision what oppression means:³

The root of the word ‘oppression’ is the element ‘press.’ The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button. Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases and liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce.

Dr. Shelly Harrell, a psychologist and academic who focuses on African-American mental health defines racism as a form of oppression as⁴

(A) system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designations...where members of the dominant group create or accept their social privilege by maintaining structures, ideology, values, and behavior that have the intent or effect of leaving nondominant group members relatively excluded from power, esteem, status, and/or equal access to societal resources.

And in their *Artful Anti-Oppression Toolkit*, the community-based art initiative Artreach talks about anti-oppression:⁵

Anti-oppression refers to all the ways an individual, community, institution or system actively prevents, challenges and ends oppression against other people. It means taking a stand against and addressing the ways that oppressed peoples are prevented access to crucial resources let alone choices. It means addressing violence, abuse of power, and the ways people are manipulated, limited, controlled, silenced, incarcerated and erased. It is widely understood that oppression in all its forms can cause mental, emotional, physical and spiritual trauma to people, communities and ecologies. Trauma can cause deep, devastating and sometimes irreparable damage, particularly when it is rooted in harms passed through many generations.

Connections Between Sexual Violence & Anti-Oppression

All of our individual and social identities overlap and intersect. As a result of oppression, race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity all impact the risk of experiencing sexual violence due to oppression.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center states, “We will only be successful in ending sexual violence when we examine and dismantle all forms of oppression. Devaluing communities of color fuels sexual violence. When we address the connections between violence



Anti-oppression work is at the core of the kinds of lasting social change that will ultimately prevent sexual violence.

Ali Mailen Perrotto⁶

and sexism, racism, classism, ableism, ageism, adultism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and other forms of *we acknowledge oppression as part of the same system of values that fuels sexual violence.*" [emphasis added].⁷ Very simply, we cannot end sexual violence without also eradicating other forms of oppression. For survivors, oppression also influences their access to healing and support options. What services are available in the community? How are they regarded by community members? Are those organizations white-led? What is that agency doing to reach marginalized groups and establish trust? Are their services accessible? Do the clients they serve align with the community they represent?



Survivors may experience:

- Racism, classism, transphobia, etc. when seeking help.
- Blame or disbelief because of their identity.
- Treatment as less worthy of safety or support because of their identity.
- Stereotyping.
- A lack of services based on their needs. They may not be able to find services or support that are culturally relevant or meet their needs. They may not think that another person will understand, especially if the only people they can find support from hold different identities than they do.
- Being minimized or silenced.
- Distrust in systems (e.g., social services, police, and medical) because of how these systems have treated their community.
- Fear for their safety and sovereignty.
- A lack of financial resources to seek help.
- A lack of access to supportive resources.
- Multiple traumatic experiences that make their recent experience worse.
- Interactions with service providers who lack cultural competence.
- Loss of hope because services and systems were not designed with their needs in mind.

Chapter 5

Oppression has a direct impact on survivors, both in how they experience trauma, as well as what resources are available to them as they heal. Here are three key things for advocates to keep in mind:

- Anti-oppression work first starts with ourselves. We all have conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) biases we need to work through. It's easier to notice things “out there” that are problematic, but we first must start with ourselves.
- An advocate's work is to provide safe and supportive services for all survivors, in a manner that allows for them to show up as their whole selves with all of their identities and experiences.
- Advocates must practice awareness because oppression exists in our society and options and experiences are not the same for each person. Advocacy should center the survivor's self-identified needs and trust them as the best expert on their own experiences and needs.

For more information on the history of sexual violence in the United States, consider reading *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* by Danielle McGuire and refer to Chapter 4 Historical Movements.

- It is not enough to just “not” be racist, xenophobic, sexist, etc. One must actively be working against systems that marginalize people based on their identity.
- Oppression is based on systems of power and privilege.
- A person can experience oppression due to one aspect of their identity, yet simultaneously experience privilege due to another identity they hold. For example, white women experience white privilege and sexism.
- Advocates must understand how their identities impact their role as a support person. They also must understand how oppression may impact a survivor's experience and decisions.

Endnotes

¹ Used with permission from and thanks to: National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) *Foundations of advocacy training manual*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/foundations-advocacy-training-manual>.

² Fierce. (2010). *LGBTQ youth of color organizing summit: Workshop curriculum*. Rutgers University, Digital Library of Nonviolent Resistance. <http://nonviolence.rutgers.edu/files/original/f3451e17636c45507610cc716f1da2618d88a011.pdf>.

³ Frye, M. (2001). *Oppression*. In P. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Race, class, and gender in the United States: An integrated study* (5th ed., p. 139-143). Worth Publishers.

⁴ Harrell, S. P. (2000). A multidimensional conceptualization of racism-related stress: Implications for the well-being of people of color. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70(1), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087722>.

⁵ Tremblay, N., Malla, A., Tremblay, J., & Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2014). *Artful anti-oppression: A toolkit for critical & creative change makers: Isms* (Vol.2). ArtReach. <https://www.artreach.org/artful-antioppression-2-isms>

⁶ Perrotto, A. M. (2016, July 5). *Exploring the intersections of race and sexual violence* [Blog post]. Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. Retrieved from <https://www.pcar.org/blog/exploring-intersections-raceandsexual-violence>

⁷ National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2017). *Our commitment to racial justice*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/blogs/our-commitment-racial-justice>