

Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education

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This chapter contextualizes the approach to oppression and social justice taken throughout this book. It provides a framework for readers who approach oppression and social justice from other positions to see what approaches we share, and where we differ. Our intention is to foster a broad and continuing dialogue among the many people who struggle, as we do, to find more effective ways to challenge oppressive systems and promote social justice through education.

The chapter examines the enduring and the ever-changing aspects of oppression by tracing ways in which "commonsense" knowledge and assumptions make it difficult to see oppression clearly. We underscore the value of history for discerning patterns, often invisible in daily life, that reflect systemic aspects of oppression as it functions in different periods and contexts. We propose concepts that enable us to freeze and focus on specific forms of oppression in our teaching while staying cognizant of the shifting kaleidoscope of dynamic and complex social processes in which they are embedded.

What Is Social Justice?

We believe that social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with

others, their society, and the broader world in which we live. These are conditions we wish not only for our own society but also for every society in our interdependent global community.

The process for attaining the goal of social justice, we believe, should also be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change. We do not believe that domination can be ended through coercive tactics, and we agree with Kreisberg (1992) in a "power with" versus "power over" paradigm for enacting social justice goals. This book focuses on developing educational processes for reaching these goals within a framework we name social justice education.

The definition of *social justice education* we present in this book includes both an *interdisciplinary conceptual framework* for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and *a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles* to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives. The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part.

We realize that developing a social justice process in a society and world steeped in oppression is no simple feat. For this reason, we need clear ways to define and analyze oppression so that we can understand how it operates at individual, cultural, and institutional levels, historically and in the present. Although inevitably an oversimplification of a complex social phenomenon, we believe that the conceptual frameworks presented here can help us make sense of and, hopefully, act more effectively against oppressive circumstances as these arise in our teaching and activism.

Why Social Justice Education Needs a Theory of Oppression

Practice is always shaped by theory, whether formal or informal, tacit or expressed. How we approach social justice education, the problems we identify as needing remedy, the solutions we entertain as viable, and the methods we choose as appropriate for reaching those solutions are all theoretical as well as practical questions. Theory and practice intertwine as parts of the interactive and historical process that Freire calls "praxis" (1970).

Articulating the theoretical sources of our approach to social justice education thus serves several important purposes. First, theory enables us to think clearly about our intentions and the means we use to actualize them in the classroom. It provides a framework for making choices about what we do and how, and for distinguishing among different approaches. Second, at its best, theory also provides a framework for questioning and challenging our practices, and remaining open to creating new approaches as we encounter inevitable problems of co-optation, resistance, insufficient knowledge, and changing social conditions. Ideally, we keep coming back to and refining our theory as we read and reflect upon the emerging literature on oppression, and as we continually learn through practice the myriad ways oppression can alternately seduce our minds and hearts or inspire us to further learning and activism. Finally, theory has the potential to help us stay conscious of our position as historical subjects, able to learn from the past as we try to meet current conditions in more effective and imaginative ways.

Defining Fear

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Hierarchical

Oppression is a group structure that is imposed on a group. It is a power relationship that is maintained through the use of force or the threat of force. It is a system of control that is designed to keep a group in a state of subordination. It is a system of control that is designed to keep a group in a state of subordination.

Defining Features of Oppression

Pervasive

We use the term *oppression* rather than discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry to emphasize the pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. The term *oppression* encapsulates the fusion of institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life in our society. For example, we present a new chapter (Chapter 7) that examines how immigrants of color are racialized and subordinated through history, law, foreign and economic policy, social custom, and educational practice. Woven together through time and reinforced in the present, these patterns provide an example of the pervasive nature of oppression.

Restrictive

On the most general level, oppression denotes structural and material constraints that significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility. Oppression restricts both self-development and self-determination (Young, 1990b). It delimits who one can imagine becoming and the power to act in support of one's rights and aspirations. A girl-child in the United States in 2006, for example, especially if she is poor or of color, is still unlikely to imagine herself as president since, unlike many other countries, we have yet to elect a woman to this high office. 140 years after the abolition of slavery, African Americans as a group have still not achieved full equality and cannot even rely on their government for basic human treatment and aid in a time of crisis, as in the recent scandalous government desertion of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Despite rhetoric that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough, a father's economic status continues to be the best predictor of the status of his offspring, a situation that worsens as economic inequality grows and the possibilities for social mobility steadily decline (*The Economist*, 2004; Hertz, 2006).

Hierarchical

Oppression signifies a hierarchical relationship in which dominant or privileged groups reap advantage, often in unconscious ways, from the disempowerment of targeted groups (Frye, 1983; Johnson, 2006; McIntosh, 1992; Miller, 1976; Wildman, 1996; Young, 1990b). Whites, for example, gain privilege as a dominant group because they benefit from access to social power and privilege, not equally available to people of color. As a group, Whites earn more money and accumulate more assets than other racial groups, hold the majority of positions of power and influence, and command the controlling institutions in society (Hacker, 1992; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997). White-dominated institutions restrict the life expectancy, infant mortality, income, housing, employment, and educational opportunities of people of color (Smelser, Wilson, & Mitchell, 2001).

Complex, Multiple, Cross-Cutting Relationships

Power and privilege are relative, however, because individuals hold multiple complex and cross-cutting social group memberships that confer relative privilege or disadvantage differently in different contexts (Collins, 1990). Identity is not simply additive but multiplicative (Wing, 2003). An upper-class professional man who is African American, for example (still a very small percentage of African Americans overall), may enjoy economic success and professional status conferred through male, class, and perhaps

dominant language and citizenship privilege as an English-speaking native-born citizen, yet face limitations not endured by white, male and female, or foreign national coworkers. Despite economic and professional status and success, he may be threatened by police, be unable to hail a taxi, and endure hateful epithets as he walks down the street (Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Petillo-McCoy, 1999). The constellation of identities that shape his consciousness and experience as an African American man, and his varying access to privilege, may fluctuate depending upon whether he is light or dark skinned, Ivy League-educated or a high school dropout, incarcerated, unemployed, or a tourist in South Africa, Brazil, or Europe.

Internalized

Oppression not only resides in external social institutions and norms but lodges in the human psyche as well (Fanon, 1968; Freire, 1970; Miller, 1976). Oppressive beliefs are internalized by victims as well as perpetrators. The idea that poor people somehow deserve and are responsible for poverty, rather than the economic system that structures and requires it, is learned by poor and affluent alike. Homophobia, the deep fear and hatred of homosexuality, is internalized by both straight and gay people. Jews as well as Gentiles absorb antisemitic stereotypes.

How do we capture such complex social phenomena in clear and understandable terms that neither oversimplify nor rigidify processes that are lived by diverse human beings in historically specific and individually particular ways? What connects the experiences of a poor woman on welfare with a professional woman facing a glass ceiling at work? What commonalities are shared by African Americans segregated in northern cities and beltway suburbs and gay, lesbian, and transgender people harassed or beaten on the streets? In what ways do Native Americans on reservations and Jews and Arabs stereotyped in the media face a similar threat? How are avoidance and isolation of people with disabilities connected to assumptions that people who speak English with an accent are ignorant? In what ways is it possible, or even desirable, that these examples be subsumed under a unified theory of oppression?

Shared and Distinctive Characteristics of "Isms"

In grappling with these questions, we have come to believe in the explanatory and political value of identifying both the particular histories and characteristics of specific forms of oppression such as ableism or classism, as well as the patterns that connect and mutually reinforce different oppressions in a system that is inclusive and pervasive. In this book we examine the unique ways in which oppression is manifested through racism, white privilege, and immigrant status; sexism, heterosexism, and transgender experiences; religious oppression and antisemitism; and classism, ableism, and ageism/adultism.

We look at the dimensions of experience that connect these "isms" in an overarching system of domination. For example, we examine the roles of a dominant or advantaged group and (a) subordinated or targeted group(s) in each form of oppression and the differentials of power and privilege that are dynamic features of oppression, whatever its particular form. At the same time, we try to highlight the distinctive qualities and appreciate the historical and social contingencies that distinguish one form of oppression from another. In this model, diversity and the appreciation of differences are inextricably tied to social justice and the unequal ways that power and privilege construct difference in our society (see Chapter 3).

From our perspective, no one form of oppression is the base for all others, yet all are connected within a system that makes them possible. We align with theorists such

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as Young (1990b) who describe distinctive ingredients of oppression without prioritizing one over another. We also share with Young the view that eradicating oppression ultimately requires struggle against all its forms, and that coalitions among diverse people offer the most promising strategies for challenging oppression systematically. Therefore, we highlight theory and practice that demonstrate interconnections among different forms of oppression and suggest common strategies to oppose it collectively.

Learning From History

Knowledge of history helps us trace the patterns that constitute oppression over time and enables us to see the long-standing grievances and legacies of differently situated social groups in our society and in the world. Current debates on issues such as affirmative action or reparations, for example, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the historical debts from slavery, legal and de facto segregation, relocation, and racial violence that have advantaged Whites as a group while locking African Americans out of positions that would allow their collective, rather than token, economic and social advancement (Katznelson, 2005). Similarly, stereotypes of Jews can only be explicated in the context of identifiable historical cycles in a 3,000-year history of exploitation, exclusion, and expulsion. Historical context is vital for understanding how stereotypes develop in one context with particular meanings and continue as unquestioned fact down through the ages.

Critical historical methods can "demarginalize" (Davis & Wing, 2000) the roles that people of color, working-class people, immigrants, and women of all groups have played in challenging oppression (Lerner, 1986; Zinn, 1980/1995, 2004). The concealed and resistance stories of marginalized groups challenge stock stories (Bell & Roberts, unpublished manuscript) and provide hope as well as evidence that oppressive circumstances can change through the efforts of human actors. Through history, we learn how groups organized and struggled to abolish slavery, extend suffrage to women, sustain unions to improve working conditions for laborers, challenge anti-immigrant policies, and advocate for gay, lesbian, and transgender rights, to name a few examples (Aptheker, 1993; D'Emilio, 1983; Zinn, 1980/1995). Historical examples suggest strategies for acting in the present to address current problems and learn from past mistakes. For example, the coalitions and ruptures between suffragists and abolitionists of the 19th century have been instructive for a 20th-century women's movement that seeks to be inclusive (Lerner, 1986), and the successes and failures of that movement have likewise informed more current efforts within global feminism (Wing, 2003).

Revisionist historians who look more closely at the 1950s for the roots of various liberation movements in what is popularly known as a quiescent period in U.S. history, show that "conservative" period sowed the seeds for mass movements that sprang up in the 1960s and 1970s (Marcus, 1992). As we encounter today a period in many ways like the 1950s, we need to recognize the seeds and lessons for similar activist movements now and in the years ahead. We can also learn from studying connections among movements that may not have been as clearly visible as they are now in hindsight. For example, newer historical studies illuminate ways in which the Civil Rights movement and African American struggles for equality and self-determination impacted Native Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos (Marabel, 2004; Oboler, 1995; Okimoto, 1994); the New Left and antiwar movements (Gitlin, 1987); feminists (Evans, 1979; Russo, 2001); gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights movements (Felnberg, 1997; Zames & Zames, 2001); disability rights movements (Marcus, 1992; Morris, 1991; Shapiro, 1993); and, most recently, blossoming youth activism and