

## Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education

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This chapter sets in context the approach to oppression and social justice described in this book. It provides a way for readers who approach oppression and social justice from other positions to see where we connect with, and in some cases differ from, other orientations. Our intention is to foster a broad 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 persistent and the everchanging aspects of oppression by tracing ways in which "common sense" knowledge and assumptions make it difficult to see oppression clearly. We discuss the value of history for discerning patterns that are often invisible in daily life but which reflect systemic aspects of oppression as it functions in different periods and contexts. Concepts are presented that enable us to freeze and focus on specific aspects of oppression in our teaching while remaining conscious of the shifting kaleidoscope of a dynamic and complex social process.

### What Is Social Justice Education?

We believe that social justice education is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice education 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 and the society as a whole.

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 agree with Kreisberg (1992) in a "power with" vs. "power over" paradigm for enacting social justice goals. This book focuses on developing educational processes for reaching these goals.

We also realize that developing a social justice process in a society 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 various individual, cultural, and institutional levels. While this is 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 are intertwining parts of the interactive and historical process which 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 creating new approaches as we encounter inevitable problems of cooptation, 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 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 Features of Oppression**

**Pervasiveness:** 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. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society.

**Restricting:** 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, 1990). 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 1996, for example, especially if she is poor or of color, is still unlikely to imagine herself as President of the country. Some one hundred and thirty years after the abolition of slavery,

African Americans as a group have yet to achieve full equality in the United States. And despite rhetoric that anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough, a father's economic status is still the best predictor of the status of his offspring.

**Hierarchical:** Oppression also signifies a hierarchical relationship in which dominant or privileged groups benefit, often in unconscious ways, from the disempowerment of subordinated or targeted groups (Wildman, 1996; McIntosh, 1992; Young, 1990; Frye, 1983; Miller, 1976). 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. Thus, as a group, Whites earn more money than other racial groups, hold the majority of positions of power and influence, and command the controlling institutions in society (Hacker, 1992). White-dominated institutions negatively affect the life expectancy, infant mortality, income, housing, employment, and educational opportunities of people of color (Bell, 1992; Gregory & Sanjek, 1994).

**Complex, multiple, cross-cutting relationships:** Power and privilege are relative, however, since individuals hold multiple and cross-cutting social group memberships (Collins, 1990). An upper-class professional man who is African American (still a very small percentage of African Americans overall) may enjoy economic opportunities not available to most women, yet at the same time face limitations not endured by white co-workers, male or female. Despite his economic and professional status and success, he may be threatened by police, unable to hail a taxi, and endure hateful epithets as he walks down the street (Cose, 1993; Dill & Zinn, 1990; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; West, 1993).

**Internalized:** Oppression resides not only in external social institutions and norms but also within the human psyche as well (Fanon, 1968; Freire, 1970; Miller, 1976). Oppressive beliefs are internalized by victims as well as benefactors. 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 ghettos and gay and lesbian people harassed on the streets? In what ways do Native Americans on reservations and Jews stereotyped in the media face a similar threat? How is 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?

**"Isms": Shared and Distinctive Characteristics:** In grappling with these questions, we have come to believe in the explanatory and political value of identifying both the particular 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, sexism, classism, antisemitism, ableism, and heterosexism, and the dimensions of experience that connect "isms" in an overarching system of domination. We look, for example, at the existence of a dominant or agent group and (a) subordinate or target group(s) in

each form of oppression as well as 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 contexts 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 ways that power and privilege construct difference unequally in our society (see chapter 5).

From our perspective, no one form of oppression is the base for all others, and no simple definition includes them all, but all are connected within a system that makes them possible. This view differs from others such as that of Young (1990) who describes distinctive types of oppression that may or may not be connected within a unitary system. We believe that eradicating oppression ultimately requires struggle against all its forms, and that building coalitions among diverse people offers the most promising strategies for challenging oppression systematically. Therefore we highlight theory and practice that demonstrate the interconnections among different forms of oppression and suggest common strategies to oppose it.

### 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 of different groups in our society. Current debates on issues such as affirmative action, for example, cannot be fully understood without also addressing the historical experiences of slavery, legal and de facto segregation, relocation, and racial violence that have locked African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans out of positions that would allow economic and social advancement as a group. Similarly, stereotypes of Jews can only be fully explored in the context of identifiable historical cycles in a three thousand 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.

Historical knowledge also offers hope as well as evidence that oppressive circumstances can change through the efforts of human actors. We can see through history how slavery was abolished, women gained the right to vote, and unions organized and improved working conditions for large numbers of people, to name a few examples (Zinn, 1980). History can 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 nineteenth century have been instructive for a twentieth-century women's movement that seeks to be inclusive (Lerner, 1986). Historians have recently begun to look more closely at the 1950s and the roots of various liberation movements in what is popularly known as a quiescent period in United States history (Marcus, 1992). Yet the seeds for mass movement that sprang up in the 1960s and 1970s were sown during that "conservative" period. As we encounter a period in many ways similar to the 1950s perhaps we can recognize the seeds for similarly activist movements in the years ahead.

As we move toward an understanding of the interlocking nature of different forms of oppression we can also trace connections among movements that may not have been as clearly visible then as they are now in hindsight. For example, new historical studies illuminate ways in which the civil rights movement and African American struggles for equality and self-determination inspired Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos as well as the new left and antiwar movements, and the feminist, gay/lesbian/bisexual and disability rights movements (Gitlin, 1987;

Goodman, 1983; Marabel, 1984; Marcus, 1992; Morris, 1991; Oboler, 1995; Shapiro, 1993). We can study these histories to learn how better to build coalitions and avoid internal divisions.

### Constructing an Inclusive Theory of Oppression

In this section we examine concepts from the literature on racism, sexism, and classism that contribute to a general theory of oppression and social justice that is inclusive of various "isms." We touch on contributions from activists in the civil rights, new left, and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as more recent movements for equality and social change. The history of ideas developed in these movements grounds our theoretical understandings in lived experience and highlights the contradictions and conflicts in different views of oppression and social justice as these are lived out in various periods and contexts. Our discussion here highlights broad themes rather than rendering an inclusive and detailed account of the rich and well-developed academic and social movement traditions to which we are indebted.

*Racism:* The social science literature on racism and insights about racism that emerged from the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s profoundly shaped the way scholars and activists have come to understand oppression and its other manifestations. The civil rights movement fired the imagination of millions of Americans who applied its lessons to an understanding of their own situations and adapted its analyses and tactics to their own struggles for equality. For example, Native American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican youth styled themselves after the African-American youth in SNCC and the Black Panther Party (Oboler, 1995). The predominantly white student antiwar movement drew directly from the experiences of the black freedom struggles to shape their goals and strategies (Gitlin, 1987). Early women's liberation groups were spawned within SNCC itself as black and white women applied the analyses of racial inequality to their own positions as women (Echols, 1989; Evans, 1979; Sayres, 1984), as did Latinas within the Puerto Rican Youth (Oboler, 1995). The gay liberation and disability rights movements also credit the civil rights movement as a model for their organizing and activism (Marcus, 1992; Shapiro, 1993). Poor people's movements and welfare rights likewise drew upon this heritage (Piven & Cloward, 1982).

Of the many valuable legacies of the civil rights movement and the academic traditions focusing on racism, we highlight here two key themes. One is the awareness that racism is a system of oppression that not only stigmatizes and violates the dominated group (Fanon, 1968; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965), but also does psychic and ethical violence to the dominator group as well (McIntosh, 1992; Bowser & Hunt, 1981; Terry, 1975). The idea that oppression affects, albeit in different ways, both the dominant and subordinate group, has been used by many other groups to make sense of their experiences of oppressive relationships and social institutions.

The second broad theme is that racism functions not only through overt, conscious prejudice and discrimination but also through the unconscious attitudes and behaviors of a society that presumes an unacknowledged but pervasive white cultural norm (Segrest, 1994; Frankenberg, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986; Said, 1993). The notion of cultural imperialism challenges the alleged neutrality of cultural assumptions that in fact define and reinforce white supremacy and exposes racial images embedded in language and cultural practices that are promoted as neutral and inclusive. The concept of unmarked and unacknowledged norms that bolster the power position of the dominant group is an important one for examining other

forms of oppression as well. Feminists, for example, use the idea to examine practices of male supremacy and patriarchy (MacKinnon, 1989) while gay and lesbian rights activists use it to analyze heterosexual privilege (Frye, 1983; Rich, 1979).

**Classism:** The new left movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s espoused ideals of political democracy and personal liberty and applied their political energy to make power socially accountable (Bowles & Gintis, 1987). New left critiques of power built on Marxist theory to examine issues of domination and exploitation and to focus on the structural rather than individual factors that maintain oppressive economic and social relations. They also critiqued the tendency to conflate democracy with capitalism to suppress exploration of alternative economic and social arrangements.

In our teaching we draw on new left analyses to examine how power operates through normalizing relations of domination and systematizing ideas and practices that are then taken as given. These analyses remind us to continually ask "in whose interest" prevailing systems operate. This question of power and the interests it serves has been a useful analytic tool for examining oppression in all of its multiple forms. Asking who benefits and who pays for prevailing practices helps to expose the hierarchical relationships as well as the hidden advantages and penalties embedded in a purportedly fair and neutral system.

**Sexism:** The women's liberation movement developed important theoretical and analytic tools for a general theory of oppression and liberation (Evans, 1979). Through consciousness raising groups women collectively uncovered and deconstructed the ways that the system of patriarchy is reproduced inside women's consciousness as well as in external social institutions, and challenged conventional assumptions about human nature, sexuality, family life, and gender roles and relations (Dinnerstein, 1976; Chodorow, 1978; Firestone, 1970). Consciousness raising groups provided a process for naming how members of subordinate groups can collude in maintaining an unequal system, identified the psychological as well as social factors that contribute to internalizing oppressive beliefs, and explored how to raise consciousness to resist and challenge such systems both inside our own consciousness and externally in the world. Feminist practice also sought to create and enact new ways of being that were liberatory. Insights from feminist theory and practice have been fruitfully used by other groups to raise consciousness, to develop an analysis of their own psychological and social assumptions and practices as these collude in maintaining oppression, and to experiment with alternative practices.

**Multiple Issues:** Women of color, lesbians, Jewish feminists, and poor and working-class women brought forth critiques from within the women's movement that questioned a unitary theory of feminism and highlighted the multiple and diverse perspectives, needs, and goals of different feminists (Collins, 1990; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). These challenges have been used to critique unitary theories of class, race, and gender and to proliferate a range of analyses and ideas about oppression(s) that take into account both the multiple identities people hold and the range of experiences of oppression lived within any given group (Spelman, 1988). Women of color who are lesbians and poor, for example, experience oppression in multiple and distinctive ways that demand more complex analyses of the mechanisms of oppression in the lives of diverse groups of people (Lorde, 1984).

More recently, postcolonial studies and postmodern theories, and ongoing discussions within various social movements, have begun to challenge simple binary categories such as black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, male/female,

and notions that essentialize, or treat as innately given, the groupings created within an oppressive social order (Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991; Trinh, 1989). The inadequacy of defining the experience of individuals and groups in simplistic binary terms is reflected through challenges within the gay/lesbian movement raised by bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people and within black movements by biracial and multiracial people. The range of experiences of people holding multiple identities and diverse social group memberships poses continuing challenges to theories of oppression to account for their experiences.

### Individual and Group Identity

How can we help our students think more broadly about group identity, how group identity is used to oppress, and the positive value of self-ascribed group memberships without reducing the complexities involved? In the United States we are socialized to view life in individual terms. Our Constitution and public ethos proclaim and celebrate the rights of individuals. Yet, in what meaningful sense can we say that a self "stands free from history and social affiliations" (Young, 1990)? As members of human communities our identities are fundamentally constructed in relation to others and to the cultures in which we are embedded (Bakhtin, 1981; Epstein, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). In a very real sense, it is impossible to separate our individual identities from the various social group memberships we hold.

When these group memberships co-exist within an unequal system, they inevitably generate multiple and conflicting personal meanings. People often affirm their group identity(ies) as a source of nurturance, pride, and meaning at the same time as they are victimized by the dominant group's characterization of their group in ways they experience as oppressive and reject as invalid.

Oppression cannot be understood in individual terms alone, for people are privileged or oppressed on the basis of social group status. One of the privileges of dominant group status is the luxury to simply see oneself as an individual. A white man, for example, is rarely defined by whiteness or maleness. If he does well on his job, he is acknowledged as a highly qualified individual. If he does poorly, the blame is attributed to him alone.

Those in subordinated groups, however, can never fully escape being defined by their social group memberships. A Puerto Rican woman, for example, may wish to be viewed as an individual and acknowledged for her personal talents and abilities. Yet she can never fully escape the dominant society's assumptions about her racial/ethnic group, language, and gender. If she excels in her work, she may be seen as atypical or exceptional. If she does poorly, she may be seen as representative of the limitations of the group. In either case, she rises or falls not on the basis of individual qualities alone, but always also partly as a member of her group(s).

This does not mean that all members of a particular social group will necessarily define themselves in exactly the same way. A person's group identity may be central, as religious identity is to a traditionally observant Jew. Or it may be mainly background, only becoming salient in certain interactional contexts, as Jewish identity may become for an assimilated Jew when confronted with antisemitism (Young, 1990). In both cases they share the burden of the social conditions facing them as targets in an unequal society.

Group identity is also an historical and contextual phenomenon. Latinos in the United States, for example, are an extremely diverse group comprising people from many different countries of origin, speaking various languages, from divergent racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups, who arrived in the United States under

widely different conditions of immigration, colonization or slavery in many time periods (Anzaldúa, 1987; Oboler, 1995). The label Latino may include a Spanish speaking, upper-class white man from Cuba as well as a Mayan speaking, Indian woman from Mexico or Guatemala. The dominant society lumps these individuals together in a group labeled "Hispanic" to which certain stereotypes are applied. On one level they thus could be said to share a common group experience of oppression in a historical United States context, and indeed, this is often the basis for political organizing across different groups of Latinos. On another level, their experiences are so divergent as to have little in common at all except when compared to the experiences of non-Latinos.

A popular view of Americanization is that people from all of these various groups will ultimately merge together to create one unified group that is a blend of all the cultures involved. This view of the United States as a "melting pot" often points to successive waves of European immigration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as evidence of this process. This view, however, ignores Anglo American conformity that required white immigrant groups such as the Germans, Irish, Italians, and Scandinavians to divest themselves of their native ethnic cultures and languages and adopt Anglo-European, middle-class cultural norms and values (McLemore, 1993; Steinberg, 1989). It also ignores the continued exclusion of non-white groups, particularly Native Americans and Americans of African, Caribbean, and Indian descent.

One of the most invidious mechanisms of oppression is the eradication of subordinate group cultures through the imposition of the dominant group's culture and language. The ideal of assimilation rests on the assumption of a "supposedly unitary majority culture" (Orni & Winant, 1986; Said, 1993), which in fact is the dominant Anglo-European culture. In such a context, individuals and groups gain equality by becoming as much like the privileged group as possible. This process automatically marginalizes those who can never "pass" into the dominant culture by virtue of race, gender, or other noticeable difference and strips people of cultural aspects they value. At its worst, this process in the United States has led to the near extermination of the native people of this continent (Churchill, 1995; Wright, 1992; Stannard, 1992).

The tension between individual and group identity(ies) is complicated further by the fact that group identity is also for many people self-consciously chosen and affirmed as a fundamental aspect of self-definition. Self-ascription, "belonging to a group with others who similarly identify themselves, who affirm or are committed together to a set of values, practices and meanings" is an important concept to many in our society (Young, 1994, 34). The emergence of black consciousness, gay pride, feminist solidarity, disability rights, red power, la raza, and other affirmations of group identity exemplifies the importance of self-ascribed group status to people who are devalued by the dominant culture.

Finally, neither individual identities nor social groups are homogeneous or stable. Individuals are constituted partly by group relations and affinities that are "multiple, cross-cutting, fluid and shifting" (Young, 1990, 48). Postmodern writers have argued persuasively against the notion of a unitary subject and essentialist notions of group identity that ignore the fluid and changing ways that people experience themselves both as individuals and as members of different social groups over the course of a lifetime (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991). "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak" (Trinh, 1989, 94).

### Hegemony, Reproduction, and the Operations of Power

We usually think of oppression in stark terms of naked power, the master beating the slave, for example. The political movements for equality over the past few decades have succeeded in challenging some of the most glaring abuses of power. Yet, while advances have been made, the basic relations of domination have been remarkably resistant to change. Young notes how general patterns of inequality continue to be reproduced even in the face of deliberate efforts to change them (1990).

Gramsci put forth the idea of hegemony to explain the way in which power is maintained not only through coercion but also through the voluntary consent of those dominated (Morrow & Torres, 1995). Hegemony describes how a dominant group can project its particular way of seeing social reality so successfully that its view is accepted as common sense, as part of the natural order, even by those who are in fact disempowered by it (Tong, 1989). Hegemony helps us understand power as relational and dynamic, something that circulates within a web of relationships in which we all participate, rather than as something imposed from top down (Foucault, 1980). Power consists not simply in a person or group in power unilaterally imposing its will on another person or group, but rather an ongoing system that is mediated by well-intentioned people acting as agents of oppression, usually unconsciously, by simply going about their daily lives (Young, 1990). The exclusion of people with disabilities from many jobs, for example, does not require overt discrimination against them. Business as usual is sufficient to prevent change. Physical barriers to access go unnoticed by those who can walk up the stairs, reach elevator buttons and telephones, use furniture and tools that fit their bodies and functional needs, and generally move in a world that is designed to facilitate their passage.

Hegemony is also maintained through "discourse," which includes ideas, texts, theories, and language. These are embedded in networks of social and political control that Foucault called "regimes of truth" (1980). Regimes of truth operate to legitimize what can be said, who has the authority to speak, and what is sanctioned as true (Kreisberg, 1992). For example, until women began speaking about spousal abuse, a husband's authority to physically control his wife often went unchallenged, rendered invisible through the language of family privacy and assumptions about sexual consent in marriage.

Oppression operates through everyday practices that do not question "the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young, 1990, 41). One important mechanism for challenging oppression, then, is to make visible and vocal the underlying assumptions that produce and reproduce structures of domination so that we can collectively begin to imagine alternative possibilities for organizing social life (Freire, 1970).

For example, the assumptions of heterosexual privilege are mostly unchallenged and invisible in our society. Social norms, rituals, and language, as well as institutional rules and rewards, presume the existence of exclusively heterosexual feelings and relationships. The language and symbols of love, attraction, family, and sexual and emotional self-development largely ignore the existence of homosexual, bisexual, transgender, and other possibilities of human potential. Well-meaning heterosexual people may bemoan gay-bashing and hate-based assaults on gays and lesbians, but assume that the system is basically fine as it is. They only see extreme examples of prejudice and live their lives unaware of the daily exclusions, insults, and assaults endured by those who are not heterosexual. Heterosexism also con-

ceals how this regime operates not only to oppress gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people but also to constrain and limit heterosexuals to narrowly gender-defined rules of behavior and options for self-expression as well.

#### **Privilege and Penalty: Internalized Domination and Subordination**

The normalization of oppression in everyday life is achieved when we internalize attitudes and roles that support and reinforce systems of domination without question or challenge. As Audre Lorde so eloquently states, "the true focus of revolutionary change is to see the piece of the oppressor inside us" (1984, 123). Both agents, those who are privileged in the hierarchy of oppression, and targets, those who are victimized and penalized, play a role in maintaining oppression.

For members of subordinate or targeted groups, internalized subordination consists of accepting and incorporating the negative images of themselves fostered by the dominant society (Bartky, 1979; Lipksy, 1977; Miller, 1976; Fanon, 1968; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). It includes such feelings as inferiority and self-hatred and often results in self-concealment, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratitude for being allowed to survive (Pheterson, 1990). Dominated groups collude in maintaining systems of oppression both because they internalize the false belief that the system is correct and as a means of survival. Women may actively accept the belief that men are more capable in politics and business and women more naturally suited to housework and childcare. They may unquestioningly adopt assumptions about female limitations and negative stereotypes of women as weak, overemotional, and irrational. Women may also support male dominance as a means of survival because to challenge it means risking jobs, relationships, and physical security.

Internalized acceptance of the status quo among subordinate groups can also lead them to turn on members of the group who challenge it. This horizontal hostility (see chapter 2) blocks solidarity among group members and prevents organizing for change. For example, gay and lesbian people who stay in the closet and pass as heterosexual in order to survive may resent activists who insist on being open and actively challenging discrimination against their group. This division within the community helps to maintain the system of heterosexism and prevents solidarity and working together for change.

Members of dominant or privileged groups also internalize the system of oppression and through their collusion with the system operate as agents in perpetuating it. Internalized domination is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within the dominant group of prejudices against others and the assumption that the status quo is normal and correct. It includes feelings of superiority, and often self-consciousness, guilt, fear, projection, and denial (McIntosh, 1992; Frankenberg, 1993; Pharr, 1988).

Dominants learn to look at themselves, others, and society through a distorted lens in which the structural privileges they enjoy and the cultural practices of their group are represented as normal and universal. The privilege of dominant groups is reinforced in both language and material practices. For example, in spite of rhetoric that the United States is a secular nation, Christian symbols, holidays, and rituals are routinely integrated into public affairs and institutions. Other religious and spiritual traditions held by large numbers of Americans, including Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Native Americans, are invisible or marginalized so much so that when members of these groups protest they are often viewed as challenging the American (Christian) way of life. Similarly, even the most modest proposals to change the eco-

nommic system to more equitably distribute goods and services is taken as a challenge to the American (capitalist) way of life.

Dominants also engage in horizontal hostility toward members of their own group who challenge the status quo. For example, Whites who challenge racist practices may be labeled by other Whites as troublemakers, extremists, or bleeding hearts. Pressure against rocking the boat or "making trouble" can discourage dominants from challenging inequality and discrimination and block change. Often by simply doing nothing, dominants perpetuate the system as agents of the status quo.

Freire argued that members of both subordinate and dominant groups are dehumanized by oppression (Freire, 1970). Part of the task of change is to engage people from both groups in examining the costs of maintaining systems of domination. The impetus for change more often comes from members of oppressed groups since those who are oppressed by a system usually have the most incentive to change it. They are also more likely to develop a critical perspective about the dominant society and to see more clearly the contradictions between myths and reality (Freire, 1970; Hartsock, 1983; Harding 1991; Collins, 1990). The "subjugated knowledges" of oppressed groups, those truths and insights about the social world that are suppressed, define the world and the possibilities for human existence differently and offer valuable alternative visions of what is possible (Collins, 1990). Thus, it is important to listen to the analyses and experiences of members of target groups to get a clearer understanding of how oppression operates and to imagine alternative ways of organizing social life.

Dominants also have an important role to play in challenging oppression and creating alternatives. Throughout our history there have always been people from dominant groups who use their power to actively fight against systems of oppression (Aptheker, 1993; Wigginton, 1992; Zinn, 1980). White abolitionists, middle- and upper-class anti-poverty crusaders, and men who supported women's rights are examples. Dominants can expose the social, moral, and personal costs of maintaining privilege so as to develop an investment in changing the system by which they benefit, but for which they also pay a price. Some argue this commitment comes through friendship (Spelman, 1988), others that it comes only through mutual struggle for common political ends (Sleeter, 1993; Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991). In either case, dominants too need to identify the role they play in maintaining the system and the price they pay for privileged status in an unequal hierarchy.

For example, when millions of Americans are homeless and hungry, those who are comfortable pay a social and moral price. The cost of enjoying plenty while others starve challenges our ability to see ourselves as good people living in a just society. It also prevents us from examining underlying structural problems in the economic system that ultimately make all working and middle-class Americans vulnerable in a changing international economy. The productive and creative contributions of people who are shut out of the system are lost to all of us. Rising violence and urban decay make it increasingly difficult for anyone to feel safe on city streets. Reduced social supports, limited affordable housing, and scarcities of food and potable water loom as a possible future for all who are not independently wealthy, particularly as we reach old age.

#### **Consciousness, Agency, and Resistance**

Given the power of systems of domination to saturate both the external world and our individual psyches, how do we challenge and change them? In a context where we are all implicated, where we cannot escape our social positions, how do we find

a standpoint from which to act (Lewis, 1993)? A commitment to social justice requires a moral and ethical attitude toward equality and possibility and a belief in the capacity of people as agents who can act to transform their world (Freire, 1970; Weiler, 1991). Hegemony is never total, it is always open to contestation (Morrow & Torres, 1995). The contradictions between espoused social principles and lived experience offer one place to begin.

Our approach to social justice education begins with people's lived experience and works to foster a critical perspective and action directed toward social change (Bell & Schniedewind, 1987; Kreisberg, 1992; Lewis, 1993). We take the position that people in both dominant and subordinate groups have a critical role to play in dismantling oppression and generating visions for a more socially just future. The specific standpoints of particular social groups are important. Within homogeneous groups, people can analyze policies and practices that support oppression and build group solidarity and support from the particular vantage points of their group(s). Heterogeneous coalitions among different groups can then develop strategies further and build support for change that draws on the energies, and differential insights and access to power of members from various groups.

The civil rights movement illustrates well the potential of a coalition of empowered people with their allies. Each group brought its own perspective and moral commitment to the struggle. Black Americans brought a collective personal integrity and willingness to risk their lives which forced American society as a whole to confront the ugly truth of racism. Jews, who were the largest group of whites to participate, drew on their own experiences of oppression to mobilize support and commitment in white communities. Whites with access to power and privilege not available to most black Americans acted as allies in the struggle for change by passing laws in Congress, using the media to publicize the struggle and joining in actions where white lives were more likely to gain police protection. Together they forged a coalition for change that inspires social movements to this day.

We can also learn from studying the factors that led to the demise of the civil rights movement in order to be more effective allies and work in coalition with others without erasing or suppressing difference in the name of false unity (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990; Bunch, 1987; Kaye/Kantrowitz, 1992; Reagon, 1983). As individuals and groups we can only have partial visions. Coalitions can bring together multiple ways of understanding the world and oppressive structures within it. Specific skills of perspective taking, empathic listening, and self-examination are useful to this process. So are practicing and sharing effective ways to work as allies to actively create alternatives to individual isolation and the suppression of political culture. Through dialogue we can find creative ways to encourage each other to begin to "imagine otherwise" (Lather, 1991). Social justice courses are one arena for practicing skills and developing collective strategies for change.

### **Conclusion**

As historical circumstances change and emerging social movements take up the issue of oppression in the United States, new definitions and understandings will evolve. Through highlighting the historical and contextual nature of this process we hope to avoid the danger of reifying systems of oppression as static or treating individuals as unidimensional and unchanging. History illustrates both how tenacious and variable systems of oppression are and how dynamic and creative we must continue to be to rise to the challenges they pose. The concepts and processes

we present in this text are continuously evolving. We hope the work presented here will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about social justice education theory and practice.

This chapter situates the approach taken in this volume within the broader discourses on oppression and social justice in academic and social change realms. In the next chapter, Bailey Jackson and Rita Hardiman describe in more detail the specific conceptual foundations for the curriculum designs to follow. They present the theoretical models developed in their early work that undergird the social justice courses we teach at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst.