Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege

A Critical Social Work Approach

Second Edition

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Chapter 3

Oppression at the Personal Level

An injustice to one is a menace to all.
—Montesquieu

Normalizing Gaze and Objectified Bodies

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

In addition to a superior body type, the nineteenth-century ideal of health and beauty was primarily an ideal of manly virtue[1]—a strong, self-controlled rational man distanced from sexuality, emotion, and everything disorderly or disturbing (Mosse 1985; Young 1990). The groups of people referred to above—such as people of colour, Jewish persons, and women—came to be defined as the Other because they did not possess the ideal body type and they also were assumed (by white bourgeois males) not to possess these manly virtues, which affirmed their degeneracy. The notion of whiteness was associated with reason, while blackness was associated with body (Kovel 1984). This allowed people who were white to identify themselves as possessing reason and therefore to be the subject of knowledge and to identify people of colour as the objects of knowledge (Said 1978). Nineteenth-century discourse often extended the concept of black to depict Jews and gays and lesbians.[2] A new discourse on old age also occurred at this time, shifting it from an association with wisdom and endurance to an identification with frailty, incontinence, and senility (Cole 1986, cited in Young 1990). All groups that did not meet the norm of the young, white, strong, self-controlled, rational, bourgeois man were objectified (in varying degrees) as the degenerate Others.

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

Acts of Oppression at the Personal Level

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

Conscious Acts of Aggression and/or Hatred

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

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

Objectified and socially constructed ugly and degenerate bodies are not the only objects of conscious acts of oppression; after all, nineteenth-century biological and medical science held that the superior body type directly determines the intellectual and character superiority of persons in this group (West 1982). Conversely, the inferior body type was seen as directly determining the intellectual and character inferiority of persons in other groups. With the rational, strong, self-controlled, and autonomous white, bourgeois male as the universal standard, whole groups of people were and are classified as intellectually and morally degenerate (Young 1990). For example, women were considered physically delicate and weak because of the specific constitution of their bodies and therefore subject to madness, irrationality, and childlike behaviour (Astbury 1996).

The Iron Lady

A common response in the US in the 1970s and 1980s to the question of whether or not a woman ever could or should become president was 'No, because at the first indication of a war, a woman president would likely start to cry' (rather than exercise the manly virtues of decisive, strong, and strategic leadership). There are exceptions to this gender-exclusive rule, however. Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, was often portrayed as 'male-like' or 'a pseudo male' (e.g., possessing strength, reason and able to make the hard decisions), as evidenced by the label 'the iron lady' that was given to her. This label marked her not only as a strong leader but also as an exception to the rule. There would be no need to label a strong male prime minister as 'the iron man' because his power would be assumed. Power appears natural in a male but unusual and even problematic in a female (Johnson 2006).

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

These and other characteristics, defined by the dominant group as part of the identity of subordinate groups, are used in the same way as derogatory names—to harass, ridicule, defame, intimidate, and in effect remind subordinate populations of their second-class status. At the same time, the definition of subordinate groups as degenerate and intellectually and morally inferior provides a convenient rationale for reserving most of life's opportunities for the dominant group. Decent income and jobs, education, good health, supportive networks, social and political inclusion, and

adequate housing in nice neighbourhoods ought to go to members of the dominant group, who are considered more deserving and worthy. Otherwise, opportunities would only be squandered. Members of the dominant class will often point to the vandalizing of public housing as evidence of a lazy, irresponsible, and ungrateful group of people.

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

A Racialized Space

From 'Racialized policing,' an opinion piece by Elizabeth Comack, professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba and a research associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Manitoba), *Winnipeg Free Press*, 17 December 2008, p. A15.

From the very first day of the inquest into the shooting death of Matthew Dumas (an Aboriginal male) by a Winnipeg police officer, lawyer Robert Tapper took pains to emphasize that race had nothing to do with Matthew's death. In her recently released report, provincial court judge Mary Curtis agreed, concluding that Matthew died as a result of his own actions, not because of police racism.

Many might take solace in Judge Curtis's conclusion, seeing it as affirming that the problem of Aboriginal-police relations in our city is really a problem 'of' Aboriginal people. But too many Aboriginal people in Winnipeg know otherwise.

For the past five months I have been engaged in a research project that has involved interviewing Aboriginal people about their experiences with the police. The initial plan was to conduct 30 interviews but more and more people kept coming forward, wanting to tell their experiences. We eventually stopped at 79 interviews.

A Racialized Space (*continued*)

What I have learned from these interviews is disturbing. Racist stereotypes and racialized practices were starkly evident in people's accounts. Aboriginal men who live in the inner city are regularly questioned by police. When asked 'what did I do wrong?' police typically respond, 'you fit the description.' As one young man remarked, 'Look at me. I look pretty much like every other male who lives in the North End.' Sometimes the men are taken to the police station several miles away, and then left to find their own way home upon release. Aboriginal women reported that they cannot even walk to the grocery store without being stopped by police, who assume they are prostitutes.

In this respect, the inner city is a 'racialized space.' Just being present—and Aboriginal—within that space makes you suspect. . . .

Other reports of racialized practices are even more troubling. Accounts of the so-called 'phone book treatment' came up regularly in the interviews. Apparently, when hit with a phone book, no visible bruises are left on the surface of the skin. The police seem to use this strategy—sometimes in the elevator of the Public Safety Building—to extract information from people.

Another disturbing practice involves the police driving Aboriginal people to the outskirts of Winnipeg and leaving them there—often in bitterly cold weather—to find their way back home. We know from Justice Wright's inquiry in Saskatchewan into the death of Neil Stonechild that such practices occurred in that province. Manitoba appears to be no exception.

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

Ungrateful or Unjust?

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

Unconscious Acts of Aversion and Avoidance

It is probably true today that theories and ideologies of superiority do not exercise the influence in society that they once did. After much struggle on the part of all subordinate groups, there is a formal commitment in most Western democracies to some sense of equality, as evidenced by civil rights and human rights codes and legislation regarding affirmative action, equal pay, and other policies of equal treatment. And as Young (1990, 132) notes:

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

This is not to say that committed racists, sexists, and so on are relics of the past, but such people must be more careful today of how and when and where they exhibit overt acts of oppression and prejudice. Many (maybe most) acts of oppression at the personal level today are not of the open and aggressive type but occur as aversive behaviour that emerges in everyday interactions between persons in dominant and subordinate groups. In other words, much oppressive behaviour at the personal level has gone underground. Hostility, fear, avoidance, and feelings of superiority are expressed by dominant group members in mundane contexts of interaction in terms

of their gestures, speech, tone of voice, and body movements (Brittan and Maynard 1984). For example, dominant group members may show that they are uncomfortable or nervous around persons of a subordinate group by avoiding eye contact, increasing the physical distance between them, using kinetic gestures of defence and aversion, or going out of their way to avoid interaction or sharing the same approximate space.

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

Rather than overt sexism, racism, and so on, the above are examples of covert acts of oppression or of oppression having gone underground. Many members of the dominant group exhibiting these aversive and unconscious acts would deny that they are prejudiced or that they acted in an oppressive way. In fact, many of these same people may be consciously committed to equality and respect for members of all social groups. This shows how entrenched sexism, racism, ageism, classism, and the like are in our individual, collective, and cultural psyches and why unconscious oppression is so difficult to counteract and eradicate. Unlike explicit acts of aggression and exclusion, acts of aversion and avoidance cannot be legislated against. There is no legal or policy remedy for this kind of oppression.

Effects of Oppression on the Individual

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

Impact on Identity

Oppression at the personal level reinforces the privileged social position of the dominant group and the disadvantaged position of the subordinate group in a number of ways. First, the group identity of the subordinate group is defined or socially constructed by the dominant group, and subordinate group members have no say in this definition or construction (though they may protest it, resist it, and try to change it). It is imposed on them, marking them as different and inferior—as the Other—and there is no escape from it, because the behaviour and reactions of members of the dominant group and other subordinate groups (and members of one's own identity group in some cases) are constant reminders of it. Conversely, dominant groups have no need to think about their group identity because they occupy an unmarked, neutral, normative, and universal position (Young 1990). The dominant group depicts the socially constructed inferior status of subordinate groups as natural and immutable or fixed (Dominelli 2002). The identity as inferior that is imposed on subordinate groups on a personal level is reinforced by the ways they are portrayed in the dominant culture, through the media, the education system, advertising, literature, movies, and so on, as will be discussed in the next chapter, and the way they are treated by social institutions, policies, and practices, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

When members of subordinate groups experience aversive and avoidance behaviour from the dominant group, they are reminded of their group identity and feel either marked (when the behaviour is aversive) or invisible (when the behaviour is avoidance) or not taken seriously or demeaned. This presents a double bind for them. They can either protest aversive or avoidance behaviour or they can suffer its humiliation in silence. Because we live in a society in which an aspect of the dominant culture is to avoid conflict and confrontation, it tends to be seen as tactless and in poor taste to draw attention to covert and often unintentional acts of racism, sexism, ageism, and so on. If a member of a subordinate group protests against such acts, it could lead to his or her exclusion from public or social events. As well, anyone who does protest against this kind of oppression is often accused of being too sensitive, or making something out of nothing, or overreacting. Thus, when experiencing oppressive behaviour, the subordinate group member is left with the choice of either suffering it in silence or protesting such behaviour and then made to feel as though he or she has acted inappropriately.

The above, of course, prompts the questions: what is identity, what are its functions, and why is it so important? 'Identity' is one of those loose and slippery terms, with no universal agreement on its precise meaning. Breakwell (1986) says that what one theorist calls 'identity' another will call the 'self,' even though both are attempting to understand the same fundamental phenomenon. Some writers view identity as one of a set (along with character, self-concept, personality, status) of social, psychological, and behavioural characteristics that differentiate one person from another. Breakwell points out that one's theoretical orientation will largely determine the meaning one gives to identity. For example, in the psychoanalytic tradition, identity is a global

awareness (i.e., awareness of oneself in relation to others) achieved through crisis and sequential identifications in social relations; the behaviourist talks in terms of personality; the symbolic interactionist might talk of the self-concept; and to the role theorist, identity is any label applied consistently to a person. The concept of identity adopted here is social-psychological and links socio-political with intrapsychic phenomena in the belief that both contribute to the establishment of or changes to one's identity or identities. In other words, this concept of identity focuses on the dialectical relationship between social context and personal psychology (i.e., the personal is political and vice versa) and considers how they both contribute to a person's identity.

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

Structure of Identity

In its simplest terms, identity refers to the conditions or distinguishing features that mark or characterize or identify an individual. A person may be identified by his or her name, history, present social status, gender, race, personality, age, appearance (e.g., height, weight), religion, and so on. Some of these identity characteristics are obviously associated with one's physical being; others are invisible (e.g., sexual orientation, religion); still others are psychological (e.g., personality); and yet others are social characteristics (e.g., class) or social roles (e.g., parent, academic). The politicization of differences among these identity characteristics involves privileging the attribute(s) of one group at the expense of others. This creates various sets of binary oppositions, which in turn, sets up a 'we–they' division among people (Dominelli 2002). If individuals do not possess the characteristics considered of value or desirable (e.g., whiteness, affluence), they become socially excluded and subject to discrimination and marginalization. And it is 'these dynamics [that] underpin the social construction of oppression' (Dominelli 2002, 38).

Obviously, many factors contribute to identity. In fact, 'identity' is probably an inaccurate or incorrect term, since each of us has many identities. Each of the above markers or identity characteristics may constitute an identity in itself. For example, part of my identity for those who know me or know of me is that of a male. However, for people who do not know me but just see me on the street, my *total* identity may be that of a male, or at least a white male. This point touches on the legitimate concern of post-modernists—that we should not assume that individuals have only one identity. Each component of identity may be considered an identity in itself, or what some writers refer to as a 'sub-identity.' These characteristics or defining properties of identity (or sub-identities) are known in the literature as the content of identity (Dominelli 2002).

Even though many of these characteristics are shared by other people, the particular constellation or configuration attached to a person makes that person distinctive and gives him or her a unique overall identity. It should be noted that the contents of identity are not static. They will shift in relation to each other according to the context in which the identity is located.

My Shifting Identity

While living in Australia, I found myself emphasizing my Canadianness more than I ever did living in Canada. I did this in part because Canadians are, on average, well-regarded by Australians, and this part of my identity gave me a good deal of positive attention and value. Similarly, but for a different purpose, when I was attending university in Toronto in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many faculty and students were 'Toronto-centric,' holding views of Maritimers such as me as a backwater and inferior group of people. In response to this negative identity imposed on Canadians living in Atlantic Canada, I emphasized (some would say overemphasized) my 'Atlantic Canadianness' in an 'in-your-face' kind of way in an effort to decentre the negative prejudgments made of me simply because I was not from the 'centre-of-the-universe' (i.e., Toronto).[3] Waddell and Cairns (1986) explain such shifts in emphasis as being determined by different situations or contexts. That is, identity components (or sub-identities) will be highly relevant or emphasized and valued in one context (e.g., my being Canadian in Australia) and irrelevant or inappropriate to emphasize in other contexts (e.g., my being Canadian in Canada). Certain identity components can also be used in acts of resistance, as in my reaction as an Atlantic Canadian in Toronto. Resisting negative views and stereotypes will be further discussed in subsequent chapters.

In addition to the contents of identity not being static, Breakwell points out that the organization of the contents are not static either. Some people have a relatively fixed hierarchy of identity components, while others have no level of fixed connectedness among the characteristics of their identities. Although it is not known exactly what causes this variation, to some extent the organization of components must depend on the value attached to them. The content dimension is one part of the structure of identity. The value dimension is the other. A positive or negative value attached to each component of identity is based on current social beliefs and values in interaction with previously established value codes (Breakwell 1986). And, of course, components that have a positive value attached to them correspond highly with the identity characteristics of the dominant group, whereas the negatively valued identity components tend to be associated with subordinate groups. Although the value

attached to various contents of identity is socially determined, the powerful and dominant group largely determines the value, and as argued in Chapter 2, they do this in a way that protects and reproduces their privileged social position.

The individual learns his or her social and personal worth through interactions with others in the context of dominant ideologies. And as Tajfel (1981) reminds us, the determination of self-worth or social worth cannot occur free of stereotypes. This is not to say that an absolute systems determination of values occurs, for self-reflection and evaluation may lead to a rejection of current dominant social values. There should be no assumption that identity is without agency—an important point for anti-oppressive practice. However, the tendency is for dominant ideologies to influence the individual's choice of personal values and beliefs about his or her identity and its value. For example, persons receiving welfare and single-parent women have been socially constructed as inferior persons and therefore are held in low esteem in a society in which the dominant ideology is neo-conservative or neo-liberal. The dominant discourse of neo-conservatism/liberalism portrays lone-parent women and welfare recipients as work-shy, abusers of the public purse, and, in the case of single-parent women, of bearing children to get on the welfare rolls.

Any viable exploration of identity must differentiate between personal identity and social identity. The latter is that part of the self-concept derived from group associations, interpersonal relationships, and social position or status, whereas the former is free of such role or relationship determinants (Breakwell 1986). There is considerable disagreement in the psychological literature about the relationship between these two concepts and whether or not the person does experience or can differentiate between the two types or aspects of identity. The position taken here is that personal identity is the way the person views himself or herself, whereas social identity is the way society or the world surrounding the person views him or her (recognizing that each will influence the other). As mentioned above and argued in more detail below, the way society views (and responds to) the individual will have an effect on, but not necessarily totally determine, the way the individual views himself or herself. With respect to the question of whether or not the individual experiences both types of identity and/or can differentiate between them, the history of oppression and oppressed persons answers this question in the affirmative. Dominelli (2002) argues that an understanding of these two aspects of identity (i.e., people's sense of themselves and what others think of them) are crucial for anti-oppressive social work, which is aimed at creating new, non-oppressive social relations. It does this, in part, by being involved in a process of contesting identities in which established truths about identity are challenged and the identity claims of subordinate groups asserted.

Oppressed persons learn early in life how society views and treats them, and throughout their lives this learning is reinforced. The (dominant or subordinate) individual actively accommodates to and assimilates portraits of the self supplied by the social world. When one's personal identity matches the negative portrait or social identity provided by the social world, then we have a case of internalized oppression.

When there is incongruence between the personal identity and social identity of a subordinate person, there is potential for resistance and change. In the case of incongruence within and between both sets of identities, however, the oppressed person is likely to experience uncertainty, insecurity, guilt, and anguish—and these feelings must be confronted before any efforts at social change can occur.

Processes of Identity Formation

Consistent with the social-psychological approach (and with phenomenological and historical materialist philosophies and critical social theory), identity is the process and product of an individual's interactions with influences in the physical and social worlds. These influences include, among others, one's history, one's family, and the dominant ideology at the particular point of history in which the individual is going through the process of identity formation. For example, many people who experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s are still influenced by this event in their current lives, as evidenced by an extreme caution and frugality with money and purchases. Part of our identity is our history and culture—who we are, where we came from, the social status and other characteristics of our family and/or social group. The family is a significant determinant of identity because it is the actual location in which people are socialized in the first instance and learn about their place in the world, how to behave in it, and what to expect from it based on personal and family characteristics. The dominant ideology of a society, which is transmitted to the individual through interactions with others and through the dominant culture (see Chapter 4), identifies and legitimates an individual's position of dominance or subordination in society according to the person's class, gender, race, age, sexuality, and so on. Persons develop and internalize a picture of themselves, in large part, according to how society views them, which in turn is determined largely by ideology, stereotypes, myths, and ethnocentrism.

The notion that identity may be totally a product of dominant ideologies is, of course, overly simplistic and crudely deterministic. At any one time, the social context contains many competing ideologies or explanations of social events, conditions, relationships, and dynamics. In other words, the individual is presented with many competing and contradictory explanations and interpretations of social reality. There is no doubt that the dominant ideology will significantly influence the formation of one's identity, but it will not necessarily be the sole determinant. The individual is not without agency. For Peter Leonard (1984), these contradictions provide the individual with choices, and it is these choices that form part of the dialectic between the individual and the social order. The individual, on the one hand, is shaped, influenced, and penetrated by the social order—its institutions, ideologies, and social practices. On the other hand, the individual will mediate the conflicting messages and ideologies and engage in acts of resistance (often unconsciously) to the dominant ideology and attempt to change the social order. The individual both shapes and is shaped by the social order. Identity is both a social product and a social process. Dominelli (2002, 39) argues that identity is a 'site for struggle' as the groups who have

inferior identities imposed on them by the dominant group 'seek to establish their own grounds for defining who and what they are.'

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

It has already been argued that many or most members of subordinate or oppressed groups will not have healthy identities as defined by the above criteria. To be viewed and treated as second-class, subhuman, expendable, and the like, and to have an identity imposed by another group based on stereotypes and Eurocentric ideas and sentiments of an inferior Other, does not facilitate the development of a healthy identity. In other words, oppression interferes with the development or maintenance of a healthy identity—and a healthy or strong sense of identity would seem to be essential for tackling one's oppression and oppressors. Building and strengthening identity would seem to be essential activities in an anti-oppressive social work practice.

Obviously, identity is a complex and multifaceted concept. A complete coverage is well beyond this book (or any other book). However, given its crucial relationship to oppression and in turn to anti-oppressive social work, we should examine a number of salient features of identity, as summarized in Table 3.1.

Coping with Threats to Identity

As mentioned above, oppression presents a serious threat to the development or to the existence of a healthy identity. Because a healthy identity is part of what it is to be an autonomous and self-directing human, the individual will develop and employ coping strategies to protect his or her identity. A coping strategy is any action the individual believes will protect the self (i.e., physical, psychological, or social self). Breakwell (1986) outlines a number of coping mechanisms that operate at the intrapersonal or intrapsychic, interpersonal, and group (inter and intra) levels, with strategies at one level having repercussions for events at the other levels. These mechanisms may be recognized and intentional on the part of the individual, or they may be employed unconsciously. They can have as their targets: (1) the removal of certain (material or ideological) aspects of the social context that contain threat; (2) the movement of the

Table 3.1 Selected Features of Identity

- Identity refers to the conditions or distinguishing features that mark or characterize or identify an individual.
- A person's identity may be based on his or her name, social status, gender, race, personality, age, appearance, religion, geographical origin, etc.
- A person's identity is formed through interactions with others in a number of different domains simultaneously.
- Because many factors and many groups have a role in forming a person's identity, each of us has many identities. These identities intersect and overlap with one another, giving us privilege in some areas and oppression in others.
- The politicization of difference by the dominant group gives privilege to those attributes that it possesses at the expense of other groups and the means to maintain this privilege across all domains of society (i.e., across social, political, cultural, and economic realms).
- One of the ways that the dominant group maintains its privilege is that it is able to define subordinate groups in negative ways as different and inferior (i.e., the Other) and impose this identity on them. This identity of difference and inferiority is reinforced in the media, the education system, the political system, the church, literature, and other social institutions, which are all controlled by the dominant group.
- A contest is entered into with the dominant group attempting to maintain its privileged position and subordinate groups attempting to (re)claim their self-defined identity and sense of self, to become full-fledged citizens, and to achieve a society marked by social equality.
- The subordinate individual is not without power or agency. Because everyone has multiple identities, subordinate groups have alternative identities different from the ones imposed on them, some of which may be privileged. These privileged identities can be used for political purposes, such as affirming positive self-identities and deconstructing dominant categories of identity to neutralize their hegemonic potential.

person into a different social position that is not as threatening; and (3) the revision of the content or value dimensions of identity structure. Although an overview of each coping mechanism is well beyond the scope of this book, a brief overview of the levels at which these coping mechanisms occur is presented below.

Intrapsychic coping mechanisms operate at the cognitive and emotional levels rather than at the action level, although they have implications for action. There are a number of groups of intrapsychic strategies: (1) those that deflect the implications of the threats to identity; (2) those that accept the threat as real and attempt to modify parts of one's identity to escape from or reduce it; and (3) those that re-evaluate and change (excising part of or adding to) the contents of identity because one or more aspects of the identity may engender threats. Interpersonal coping strategies rely on changing relationships with others to cope with threats. Examples are isolating oneself from others and its opposite strategy, negativism, whereby the person confronts

anyone who threatens his or her identity structure. Group coping strategies include joining a number of different groups simultaneously to ameliorate the threat or stigma of being a member of one's identity group only. Another group strategy is to come together with others who are experiencing the same threat or form of oppression (either as an information-exchange group or a self-help group). The following subsection presents a different version of some of these coping mechanisms.

Effects of Oppression on the Psychological Functioning of the Oppressed Person

Moane (1999), in reviewing a series of studies, found that oppression negatively affects psychological functioning because it leads to a loss of personal identity (discussed above), a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, alienation and isolation, and guilt or ambivalence. Some of these effects of oppression are discussed in the following paragraphs.

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

What the self-esteem studies are likely reflecting is the fact that a subordinate person's social environment is one in which insecurity is normal. Lack of control over one's destiny and the unpredictability of one's world contribute to a general insecurity, anxiety, fear, and restlessness. Black children, for example, perceive their environments as more threatening than white children do (Baughman 1971, cited in Adam 1978). The gay or lesbian person does not know what to expect from family,

friends, and workmates if and when he or she 'comes out.' The verbal bashing of poor people and social assistance programs by bourgeois politicians and the mainstream media contributes to unrest and worry among people receiving financial assistance. The objective insecurity of members of subordinate groups is often mirrored in a heightened sense of personal insecurity and anxiety (Adam 1978). This may lead to lowered self-esteem, but it may not. And if it does, it may not mean lower self-esteem in every area of the subordinate person's psyche.

Another psychological effect of oppression is that members of subordinate groups often assume ambivalence or guilt for the systemically constricted life chances available to them. The post-colonial revolutionary and writer Frantz Fanon (1967, 139) says, 'All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good.' Oppressed persons might ask themselves, 'What have I (or my identity group) done to attract the hostilities of society?' In the absence of anything obviously responsible for the oppressive situation, coupled with the continuous message from the dominant group that they and similar people are ugly, degenerate, and morally inferior, subordinate persons often blame themselves. Women who are sexually assaulted might ask, 'What did I do to bring on this assault?' Black parents might teach their children not to do anything to attract negative attention and then berate them when they are harassed or beaten even if the attacks were unprovoked. Concentration camp victims often experienced profound guilt about events completely beyond their control. Gay and lesbian persons may suffer enormous guilt (especially for disappointing their parents), given religious teachings that homosexuality is an abomination and until recently its classification by the medical establishment as a mental illness (Greenberg 1988). Suffering, it seems, can lead to the growth of guilt. Suffering may be experienced as 'guilt anxiety' rather than social injustice. Over time it develops a logic of its own in that it emerges as an ingrained, reflexive mechanism to cope with oppression (Adam 1978). Sometimes it is easier to accept blame and punish oneself for something one did (but in reality did not do) than to believe that the hostile environment one faces stems from who one is and is thus beyond one's control. In this way, social order is maintained.

Alienation is another outcome of oppression. In fact, Bulhan (1985, 186) argues that it is the key to understanding oppression: 'there is hardly a concept as pertinent to the situation of oppression as alienation.' The concept has a long history and has gone through many reformulations, most notably by Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx. Bulhan argues that it is a dynamic concept with synthesizing power. It not only relates experience to social conditions but also entails a critique. And consistent with critical social theory, this critique implies a solution. Marx's concept of alienation is probably the best known. He argued that capitalism resulted in the alienation of the worker and that this alienation had four aspects. The first was the worker's alienation from the product of his or her labour, which, according to Meszaros (1970), meant alienation from that which mediates the worker's relationship to the external world and hence to the objects of nature. The second aspect of Marx's concept of alienation was the

worker's alienation from himself or herself because he or she is coerced, controlled, and regimented and therefore derives no intrinsic satisfaction from work activities. The worker is alienated from his or her own activity, and that also means alienation from his or her body, mind, and spirit, which taken together constitute the self. The third aspect refers to alienation from human essence as the worker is denied realization of his or her inherent human potential through work activity. The final aspect of Marx's concept of alienation is alienation from other people in that capitalism divides society into antagonistic classes (owners and workers) to the point where degradation and violence ensue (Bulhan 1985).

Obviously, Marx's concept of alienation is that of 'alienated labour,' and his focus was on economic and class oppression. Fanon (1967), the black Algerian psychiatrist, revolutionary, and intellectual, adopted alienation as a central and synthesizing concept. Bulhan, in his book on Fanon and his ideas, points out that although Fanon was greatly influenced by the Marxian formulation of alienation, as a psychiatrist he was interested in a psychological perspective of the concept. As well, his exposure to existentialism (he was a personal friend of Jean-Paul Sartre), phenomenology, and psychoanalysis enriched his perspective on alienation. His reformulation of the concept of alienation, which occurred in a developmental way over years of observing and experiencing colonization first-hand and gathering clinical data, emphasized some variables (i.e., cultural and psychological) more than others (i.e., economic and class).

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

The following section looks at how oppressed persons might respond to oppression and its effects. The role of an anti-oppressive social worker in dealing with the effects of oppression will be covered in the final two chapters.

Surviving Oppression: Responses of Oppressed People at the Personal Level

Frantz Fanon (1967; 1968) proposed a theory of identity development among oppressed people. He presented three models of psychological defence and identity development under conditions of prolonged oppression: the first involved a pattern of compromise; the second, flight; and the third, fight. Bulhan (1985) developed

these three models into stages of colonization (although they have relevance for most oppressed groups). Although the notion of stages is fraught with practical difficulties because it implies a linear track of progress (see the discussion in Chapter 8 on the limitations and dangers of adopting linear developmental models), Bulhan's model sheds some light on the shifting relationship between oppressed people and their oppressors. The first stage (capitulation) involves an identification on the part of the oppressed with the oppressor, which results in increased assimilation into the dominant culture along with a simultaneous rejection of one's own culture. The second stage (revitalization) sees a reactive repudiation of the dominant culture and a defensive romanticization of the subordinate (or indigenous culture in post-colonial terms). The third stage (radicalization) is characterized by synthesis and an unambiguous commitment to radical change. In a not dissimilar fashion, Dominelli (2002) identifies three possible courses of action for oppressed people in response to their oppression: acceptance, accommodation, and rejection. She contends that any one individual or group may use any one of these in a strategic or tactical manner to achieve a particular goal and may move from one to the other in no particular sequence.

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

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

The lack of a strong self-identity can, in many cases, lead to an internalization of the dominant group's stereotyped and inferiorized images of subordinate populations (Young 1990). This internalized oppression, in turn, causes some oppressed people to act in ways that affirm the dominant group's view of them as inferior people and consequently leads to a process of inferiorized persons reproducing their own oppression. Through a process of cultural and ideological hegemony, many oppressed

people believe that if they cannot make it in our society, that if they are experiencing problems, it is their own fault because they are personally incapable of taking advantage of the opportunities that the dominant group says are available to everyone. It is, as Paulo Freire (1994 [1970]) said, as though the oppressor gets into the head of the oppressed. People come to understand their interests in ways that reflect the interests of the dominant group.

When people internalize their oppression, blaming themselves for their troubled circumstances, they often contribute to their own oppression by considering it unique, unchangeable, deserved, or temporary (Adam 1978), or they may blame other significant people in their lives, such as parents or other family members. Oppressed persons often also contribute to their own oppression by psychologically or socially withdrawing or engaging in self-destructive behaviours, which leads to their rejection by others. This rejection in turn confirms the low image they may have of themselves (Moreau and Leonard 1989). The radical psychiatric movement of the 1970s considered all alienation as the result of oppression that has mystified or deceived oppressed people. That is, the oppressed person is led to believe either that he or she is not oppressed or that there are good reasons for his or her oppression (Agel 1971).

Paulo Freire (1994 [1970]) discusses several positions that oppressed people may adopt that either reinforce or contribute to their own oppression. Fatalism may be expressed by the oppressed about their situation—'there is nothing I can do about it' and 'it is God's will' are common expressions of fatalism. However, the oppressor often interprets this fatalistic attitude as docility or apathy, which reinforces the dominant group's view of the oppressed as lazy, inferior, and getting no more than they deserve. Horizontal violence often occurs among oppressed people—an Aboriginal person, for example, might strike out at another for petty reasons—which again reinforces the negative images of subordinate groups held by the dominant class. Self-deprecation also occurs when a group hears so often that they are good for nothing that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. Moreau and Leonard (1989) and Adam (1978) call this process 'inferiorization.' Another characteristic of some oppressed persons is that they feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his or her way of life, which is rather similar to the Stockholm Syndrome whereby hostages over time often come to feel affection and even admiration for their captors. This affirms, of course, the belief that oppression is legitimate and that it is more desirable to oppress than to be oppressed.

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

1. *Mimesis.* One response to oppression is for a member of a particular oppressed group to mimic or imitate the behaviours and attitudes that the dominant group displays towards that group in an attempt to gain a slightly more privileged status. For

example, the harshest critics of the non-working poor often are the working poor (who repeat all the punitive and moralistic accusations expressed by the dominant group), even though both groups suffer the oppression associated with poverty. Similarly, an organized women's group in Canada called REAL Women has been unrelenting in its attack on the efforts of the women's movement to obtain more gender equality in society, and 'Uncle Tom' black persons who are given positions of authority over other black persons not infrequently treat their subordinates as inferiors rather than as compatriots.

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

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

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

3. *Psychological withdrawal.* Oppressed persons may adopt a cautious, low-profile conservatism as a way of decreasing their visibility (and social penalties) and compensating for a disfavoured identity. Overly visible behaviour (even though it may sometimes be deliberate acts of resistance to oppression) by fellow members may be strongly condemned because it gives the rest a bad name (for example, the 'loud-mouthed' black, the 'pushy' Jew, or the 'swish' homosexual). Reducing the hazards of a high-risk environment seems to outweigh the value of active resistance. This coping effort is often manifested in psychological responses such as passivity, lethargy, and submission. African-Americans during the period of slavery and Jews in Nazi

concentration camps often exhibited these psychological characteristics. Obviously, psychological withdrawal reinforces rather than threatens the oppressive order.

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

5. *Magical ideologies.* Some oppressed people see their situation with respect to the dominant group as so immutable that they look to supernatural means as a way out of their oppressed condition, such as astrology, various superstitious beliefs, messianism, and even gambling. They appeal to someone or something full of power and authority to fix what is wrong. Internal blinders shield the person from confronting the real menace causing his or her inferiorized situation and lead him or her on a search for a magical solution. For example, reading the astrology section of the daily newspaper may be an interesting and harmless pastime for many people, but some people may avoid taking action on troublesome life situations because they believe their destiny is determined solely by the stars. So why even try? They can do nothing about their oppression, because their destiny rests with a force greater than themselves. Every day begins a new search (in an astrological chart) for a sign that their travails will be (magically) alleviated or eliminated. This kind of fatalism is also manifest among the many people who believe that everything in life is in God's hands and that no amount of human endeavour can change what Divine Providence has in store for them. Because people believe that their problems are determined by magical means or supernatural beings, then only a magical or supernatural solution can resolve them.

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

7. *Social withdrawal.* Social withdrawal is a coping strategy in which the oppressed person externalizes identity conflict into the immediate social environment. The oppressed person may develop repertoires of behaviours for different audiences. That is, he or she will behave in one way when in contact with the dominant group

(usually assuming a low profile to escape attention) and another way when in contact with their own subordinated community (in a way that affirms with others their true identity). Social withdrawal does not challenge or negate the dominant view of the oppressed group, since it is a means of placating the powerful other. For example, black parents may advise their children to avoid (withdraw from) confrontation with the dominant white society as a means of coping with harassment. In effect, this behaviour contributes to a strategy of invisibility, but it also supports the dominant view that black people are by nature servile and passive.

The other side of social withdrawal is that it permits the first move towards reconciliation with other members of one's subordinate group. As oppressed individuals withdraw from the dominant group by acts of compliance and enter into communication with other members of the subordinated community, they may discover their identity with them. That is, they become acquainted with their identity as defined by their own group, as opposed to the identity that has been defined and imposed by the dominant group. A dialectical movement towards integration occurs as community members discover each other and in the process discover themselves. Although the discovery of self and community requires some degree of social withdrawal from an inhospitable social environment controlled by the dominant group, the danger is that it may lead to ghettoization, which, though safe from the dominant group, is also stifling and confining for oppressed persons. The ghetto or haven is a response to oppression and potentially a first assertion of community. It has the potential to stimulate the development of a more genuine identity—a sense of community, solidarity, and confidence—so that members are able to assert their authentic identity and differences in ways that contravene the prevailing rationality of the dominant group.

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

Critical Social Theory and Personal Oppression

As observed in Chapter 1, the treatment of oppression and anti-oppression in this book is grounded in critical social theory in general and in the conflict perspective of society in particular. Such theory explains social problems as the result of contests or conflicts between various social groups, with a dominant group controlling most of society's resources and possessing most of the economic and political power. Society is

organized for the benefit of this group (mainly bourgeois males of European descent) and is held together not by consensus but by the differential control of resources and power. Social structures, processes, and practices are established by the dominant group and favour its members while oppressing others along lines of class, race, gender, age, sexuality, and so on. In other words, dominant groups enjoy their privilege at the expense of subordinate groups by way of a set of unjust social conditions and a system of oppressive social relations (Gil 1998).

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

Conclusion

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

The effects of these acts of oppression on oppressed people at the personal level include the imposition of an identity by the dominant group that is often stereotyped, essentialist, and inferior. The subordinate group had no say in the development or definition of this identity. On the surface, there appears to be no escape from this negative identity—subordinate group members are reminded of it in their interactions with the dominant group on a daily basis, and a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety invariably accompanies it. Even if subordinate group members avoid interactions with the dominant group, they see and hear about their negative identities every day in the media, through the education system, advertising, literature,

movies, and so on. The politics of identity include a tendency to accept and internalize this socially constructed and imposed identity and to act in ways that reinforce the stereotypical identity in the eyes of the dominant group.

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

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

Critical Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever experienced an act of unconscious aggression or aversion directed at you because of some subordinate group identity you may have? What was the act directed at you? How did you feel and what did you think when it happened? Compare what you did at the time with what you really wanted to do. How do you usually cope with these acts of unconscious aggression or avoidance that you experience?
2. Have you ever committed an act of unconscious aggression or aversion in your role as a member of a dominant group? If you can recall such an event, did you do it alone or in conjunction with other members of your identity group? Given your current understanding of unconscious acts of aggression or avoidance, would you do anything differently if the situation were to arise again? If so, what?
3. Make a list of your identities that have a positive value attached to them by society (e.g., white, male). Make a list of your identities that have a negative value attached to them by society (e.g., homosexual, resource-poor). What do you consider your master (most prominent) identity? Why?
4. Make a list of the privileges you enjoy that are associated with each positive identity. (See Peggy McIntosh's celebrated article, 'White privilege'). Make a list

of negative experiences you have had that are attached to each negative identity. Which list was the most difficult to compile—positives or negatives? Why?

5. If you are a member of a subordinate group, how do you usually cope with the negative treatment you receive because of your perceived inferior identity? For example, do you discuss it with your family or other members of your group? Do you grit your teeth and say nothing until the experience passes? Do you use humour to deal with it? Do you strike out verbally or some other way?
6. If you are a member of a dominant group, how do you think you would respond if you received the same negative treatment that members of subordinate groups experience every day simply because of their membership in a subordinate group?
7. When some members of dominant groups are asked about their privilege or are asked a question such as number 6 above, they grow defensive and start talking about the hard times they have experienced and that they worked hard for their privileges and so on. What do you think lies behind this kind of defensiveness and denial of privilege?

Further Readings

Adam, Barry D. (1978). *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life.* New York: Elsevier. This book was written well ahead of its time. It remains one of the most insightful and incisive assessments of how domination survives and an inequitable social order is reproduced. It examines the dialectic of inferiorization and responses to inferiorization by presenting a phenomenology of everyday life that comprehends the choices made by people within the material and practical constraints of their subordination, which then recreate or alter that subordination. The responses of resistance, accommodation, and compliance are examined in detail, and strategies to resist domination are presented.

Bulhan, Hussein A. (1985). *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression.* New York: Plenum Press. This book, written by an African-American psychologist, presents and extends many of the ideas and theories of the African psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon—the father of post-colonialism. Bulhan developed Fanon's three models of psychological defence and identity among colonized/oppressed people (i.e., compromise, flight, and fight) into stages of colonization that have relevance for all oppressed groups—capitulation (assimilation into dominant culture) is the first stage, followed by revitalization (repudiation of the dominant culture), and finally, radicalization (a commitment to radical change). Following Fanon's lead, Bulhan includes culture in psychological theory and practice and further develops a 'black' psychology.

Dominelli, Lena (2002). *Anti-oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. This book, written by one of the leading theorists in the field of progressive or critical social work, focuses on how social workers can assist individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and the larger societal context to challenge and transcend the many sources and forms of oppression (e.g., poverty, racism, sexism, disability, mental illness, and so on) that disempower them. A significant focus of the book is that of 'identity' as a central feature of oppression. This is so because identity is intricately bound up with people's sense of who they are and who others are in relation to themselves. Dominelli spells out concepts such as identity politics, identity formation and exclusionary processes, identity in social work, and othering—all from an anti-oppressive framework.

Fanon, Frantz (1994). *Black Skin, White Masks.* New York: Grove Press. This book has been and continues to be a major influence on civil rights, anti-colonial, and black consciousness movements around the world. It is the unsurpassed study of the black psyche in a white world. Fanon presents his thesis that the inferiority complex of a subjugated people and the alienation of some of them from their own identity group results in their wish to be identified with and to imitate their European colonizers. This book is recommended reading for those who wish to understand more about the effect of colonialism on the colonized and their varying reactions to this oppressive menace.