

Here are some descriptions of POWER, PRIVILEGE and OPPRESSION.

**POWER:** The ability to influence and/or act.

**Let's break that down.**

Individuals have power, which includes free will and ability to make decisions. But there are also many other types of power:

- History has power
- Laws have power.
- Ideas have power.
- Money has power.

These and other types of power affect the amount and type of influence, or power, particular individuals have.

**PRIVILEGE:** Unearned benefits given to members of one social group as a result of the systematic targeting or marginalization of another social group.

**Let's break that down.**

Privilege is benefits that people don't earn, but get just because of who they are or are perceived to be.

For example, if you work hard to build up your wealth, you receive the earned benefit of getting to buy things. But if you are perceived to be wealthy, you receive the unearned benefit (privilege) of being treated well by society, like by salespeople or the police, even if you do not spend the money you earned.

Systematic targeting and marginalization means it doesn't happen randomly or by chance, but that privilege is doled out according to a part of a fixed system, one which does damage to other people. And because people with privilege get more, other people get less just because of who they are.

**OPPRESSION:** The systematic targeting or marginalization of one social group by another social group for the benefit of the more powerful social group.

**Let's break that down.**

Oppression happens when a group of people, categorized by a shared identity, experience or trait, with more systemic power (people with privilege) use their power to harm a different group of people.

There are intentional acts of oppression and unintentional acts of oppression. Oppression happens even if the people with the privileged identity or trait don't mean for it to happen.

Bias, discrimination and prejudice are not necessarily oppression, except when bias, discrimination and prejudice benefits the social group with more systemic power and damages the social group with less social power.

And here are four levels at which privilege and oppression function.

## **IDEOLOGICAL**

The ideological stems from a system of ideas and ideals that one social group is somehow better than, and therefore dominant over another group. These group divisions are based on a characteristic or trait that one group holds and the other does not. As a result of these ideologies, people who are in the dominant social group have greater access to resources than those in the social group that the ideology deems as lesser. This supports the systems of privilege and oppression. While we may not consciously subscribe to or believe in an ideology, its pervasiveness impacts the way we experience the world and people in it.

## **INSTITUTIONAL**

Because ideologies are pervasive, they impact the way people create, govern and enforce the institutions of society. Groups who have more access to resources because of an ideology have a greater ability to influence or impact institutions that make up society, and most often structure these institutions in ways that continue to support and reinforce the ideology. As a result, these systems of beliefs get embedded in social and political structures and policies, and shape the frameworks and structures of language, laws, the legal system and police practice, the education system, hiring and employment practices, public policy, housing development, media images, political power, etc.

## **INTERPERSONAL**

Interpersonal refers to the way individuals enact these dominant ideologies on each other. The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into our institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally mistreat individuals in the other group. These interactions are supported by oppressive social and political institutions, serve to uphold and reinforce the dominant ideology, and therefore support the dominant group's power over the oppressed group.

These interactions are often not conscious or intentional, but are still damaging as they continue to uphold the ideology that supports inequitable access to resources. Also, note that interpersonal oppression is different from discrimination, prejudice, bias or bigotry. Oppression is discrimination, prejudice, bias or bigotry based on a dominant ideology and supports the dominant group's greater access to resources.

## **INTERNALIZED**

Developed through interpersonal interactions and supported by institutions, individuals internalize the dominant ideologies, and this influences our thoughts and actions. For those in the privileged or dominant group, internalizing ideologies can lead to beliefs of superiority over others. People in the oppressed group may internalize oppressive ideologies by limiting possibilities and restricting behavior and can experience feelings of inferiority, despair, self-loathing and/or powerlessness. The decisions we make are impacted by internalizing these ideologies, and can serve to reinforce the dominant ideology.