

Internalized Oppression



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Introduction

- Let's assume Fred is insulted frequently:
 - “You are ugly/stupid/untrustworthy/incompetent/sick/perverted/evil/...”
 - Such verbal abuse might come from parents, a partner, a bully at school or work, ...
- Eventually, Fred might start to believe the insults
- As a result, Fred might develop some problems:
 - Lack of confidence and low self-esteem
 - Depression
- What happens when an *entire group* is insulted frequently?
 - The result is often called *internalized oppression*
 - Examples: internalized racism, internalized classism, internalized sexism, internalized homophobia, ...

1. Symptoms of internalized oppression

Symptoms of internalized oppression

■ Let's assume:

- You belong to an oppressed group, X
- There are lots of negative stereotypes about X people (stupid, dirty, incompetent, criminal, immoral, ...)

■ After you repeatedly hear the negative stereotypes:

- You may come to believe them about yourself (oppressed groups often have high rates of mental health problems)
- You may come to believe the stereotypes about *X people in general* (the next few slides provide examples of problems this creates)

Example of internalized oppression

- From Chapter 15 (“Vocational Guidance”) of *The Mis-education of the Negro* by Carter Woodson, 1933
 - A white-owned chain store was asked to put a black manager in charge of one branch
 - A survey was carried out to find how black people felt about this idea
 - “One hundred thirty-seven Negro families in that neighbourhood seriously objected to buying from Negroes and using articles handled by them.”
- The author explains this was due to internalized oppression:
 - Black people had internalized racist stereotypes, including black people are “dirty”
 - Nobody wants to buy from a shop staffed with “dirty” people

Economic effects of internalized oppression

- Many people want to have (more) money:
 - Often, they settle for the *appearance* of having more money
 - They buy items that give the impression they are rich
 - Bigger houses, bigger cars, bigger TVs, designer clothes, ...
 - Many people buy such things on credit, thus making them poorer
- Likewise, if X people think “X is inferior to non-X” then:
 - They might eat and buy items associated with non-X
 - They might prefer to shop at non-X businesses
- Result:
 - X-owned businesses suffer (thus keeping the X community poor)
 - X-related culture struggles to survive

Internalized oppression is widespread

- Slang terms for people suffering from internalized racism:
 - Oreo (a black cookie with a white filling)
 - Coconut (brown on the outside, white on the inside)
 - Bounty bar (a chocolate bar with a coconut filling)
- These slang terms illustrate that internalized oppression:
 - Is common around the world
(those slang terms are used in England, South Africa and the USA)
 - Can be serious enough to warrant a label that means “traitor to your own race”

Infighting

- An oppressed group has a limited amount of “safe” resources
 - Places of worship, community centres, pubs/discos, cafes, restaurants
- Internalized oppression may make members of the group think:
 - “We are incompetent, therefore we *cannot create* additional resources”
 - “We are inferior, therefore we do not *deserve* additional resources”
- This can cause in-fighting within the oppressed group:
 - People compete to control the existing limited resources
 - It would be better if they cooperated to create new resources

A nation of begrudgers

- Many Irish people say Ireland is “a nation of begrudgers”
 - To begrudge = to envy or resent the good fortune of somebody else
- Some other countries also have a begrudgery stereotype of themselves
- One quote from the bible suggests begrudgery is not restricted to modern societies:
 - “A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country” — Mark 6:4
- Perhaps begrudgery is a symptom of internalized oppression:
 - “X people are inferior and don’t deserve success. Therefore, that X person should stop being successful and get back into his or her place.”

2. Recipe for creating internalized oppression

Ingredients of internalized oppression

- One ingredient of internalized oppression is obvious:
 - *Frequently repeated insults* of the group. For example:
 - Derogatory stereotypes
 - Slavery or segregation
 - Laws that discriminate against X people
- But, another, less obvious ingredient is also important:
 - *Lack of positive images* about the group
(including the group's history, culture, and role models)
 - This can be achieved through censorship of the school curriculum and reported news

Example

- Black people in the USA were taught they were inferior:
 - Through slavery, segregation laws and socially-condoned lynchings
 - Think of these as being *frequently repeated (extreme) insults*
- The *lack of positive images* was achieved through censorship:
 - History in school focussed on white Americans and white Europeans
 - There was *no* mention of African history despite its impressive ancient achievements in metalworking, science, mathematics, architecture, philosophy, art and empires
- From Chapter 1 (“The Seat of the Trouble”) of *The Mis-education of the Negro* by Carter Woodson, 1933
 - “The thought of the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies.”

Example (cont')

- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* also mentions the lack of information about black people in American history books:
 - From Chapter 2 (“Mascot”)
 - “We came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. [The teacher] laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless.”
- This censored, anti-black history was taught to all students:
 - White people were *taught* to hate black people
 - Black people were *taught* to hate themselves
- Chapter 1 of *The Mis-education of the Negro*:
 - Stopping such bigoted teaching “is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom.”

Examples from Nelson Mandela

- These quotes are from Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*
- Chapter 3:
 - "I did not yet know that the real history of our country was not to be found in standard British textbooks, which claimed South Africa began [...] in 1652."
- Chapter 6:
 - "We were taught — and believed — that the best ideas were English ideas, the best government was English government, and the best men were English men."
- Chapter 20
 - "The government subsequently passed a law that made it an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment to offer unauthorized education."

Widespread historical censorship

- The censorship of black history is not unique
- In many countries, history taught in school censors or disparages the role of minorities, such as:
 - Other races or religions
 - Women (a 51% minority)
 - Non-heterosexuals
 - People with disabilities
- Think of the history education you received in school:
 - Were you taught about historical figures of minority groups?

3. Recipe for stopping internalized oppression

Recipe for stopping internalized oppression

- The recipe for stopping internalized oppression is the opposite of the recipe for creating internalized oppression
- The recipe has two ingredients:
 - Stop the anti-X insults
 - Find and promote positive images of X people
- The first ingredient is the most obvious:
 - But the second ingredient is equally important and is often underappreciated
- The next few slides suggest some categories of positive images

Positive images of X people

- Carter Woodson (author of *The Mis-education of the Negro*):
 - Founded Negro History Week (now known as Black History Month)
 - This has inspired other oppressed groups to do likewise
 - Example: there is a Gay History Week/Month in some countries
 - Do you know of other “X” History weeks?

- Role models and heroes for X people are important. Example:
 - Chapter 2 (“Mascot”) of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*:
 - “Joe Louis knocked out James J. Braddock to become the heavyweight champion of the world. And all the Negroes in Lansing, like Negroes everywhere, went wildly happy with **the greatest celebration of race pride our generation had ever known.**”
 - Can you think of comparable people or events for other groups?

- Books, movies and TV shows featuring X characters portrayed in a positive way

Positive images of X people (cont')

- Biographies of X people who achieved great things:
 - Inventors and scientists
 - People who challenged anti-X laws
 - Political leaders, ...
- Successful businesses run by X people
 - And the X community *supporting* those businesses
- Aspects of X culture that can be exported into mainstream culture. Examples:
 - Food, art, music
 - Bruce Lee popularised Chinese martial arts in other countries
- Epic stories about X people. Examples:
 - *Roots* by Alex Haley (book and two TV mini-series)
 - *Defiance* by Nechama Tec (book and movie)

Positive images of X people (cont')

- Stopping the anti-X insults is often outside the control of X people
- But it is within the power of X people to:
 - Find and bring to light *existing* positive images of X people
 - Create *new* positive images of X people
- As the quantity of positive images of X people grows:
 - Internalized oppression will decrease
 - The frequency of anti-X insults from non-X people will also decrease (albeit at a slower rate)

4. Schools for oppressed groups

Schools for oppressed groups

- Some oppressed groups create their own schools:
 - Examples: black people and women
- This practice can be controversial. For example:
 - There were white-only and black-only schools during segregation in America and apartheid in South Africa
 - Now that schools are integrated, why would black people want to un-integrate the schools again? Isn't that just segregation?

Schools for oppressed groups (cont')

- There is an important reason for such schools:
 - Under segregation, a racist curriculum was taught in black-only schools
 - Even after segregation ended, integrated schools still have a racist bias in the curriculum
 - Example: history textbooks are still white-oriented
- A school run by black people can create a black-inclusive curriculum
 - In this way, internalized racism can be eradicated more quickly
- The need for black schools will disappear *when* racism finally disappears from integrated schools

5. Summary

Summary

- Internalized oppression causes X people to:
 - Hate themselves (as individuals)
 - Hate X people (as a group)
- Some symptoms of internalized oppression:
 - X people do not support X businesses, and so ensure continued poverty of the X community
 - In-fighting over the limited X resources instead of cooperating to increase the quantity of X resources
 - Possibly begrudgery
- Recipe for internalized oppression has two ingredients:
 - Frequent anti-X insults
 - Censor positive images of X people
- Respond by creating & promoting positive images of X people