

Underappreciated Tactics for Fighting Oppression



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Introduction

- Oppression is rarely ended through a *single* tactic:
 - Success is more likely with a *combination* of tactics
 - The tactics can form an equation for change
($A + B + C = \text{end of oppression}$)
 - Recall that *Equations for Change* was the subject of an earlier chapter
- This chapter discusses several tactics that are often used by members of an oppressed group
- Many people underappreciate the importance of these tactics:
 - Possibly because they view them in isolation instead of as being part of an equation for change
 - Ignoring some of these tactics means ignoring part of an equation for change, so it can hinder the fight to end oppression
 - Even if a tactic does not appeal to you personally, you should try to support others who use the tactic

1. Create a community newspaper

The need for community newspapers

- Mainstream newspapers:
 - Rarely report news of interest to an oppressed group
 - Often report news in a way that supports existing oppression
- Some famous activists started newspapers or magazines for their own communities:
 - Gandhi (for Indians)
 - Malcolm X (for the Nation of Islam)
 - John Holt (for home-based education)

Difficulties for a community newspaper

- Problems faced by many community-specific newspapers:
 - They are smaller than mainstream newspapers
(so they seem unimpressive by comparison)
 - Articles about community events are less dramatic than articles about national or international issues
(so a community newspaper is often thought of as boring)
 - They act as a concentrated source of information about oppression faced by the community
(the bearer of bad news is often disliked)
 - A small readership means funds for running the newspaper are scarce
- These problems can create a vicious circle:
 - Many newspapers for oppressed communities struggle to survive

Benefits of a community newspaper

- A community-specific newspaper offers important services:
 - It can report oppressive events ignored by mainstream newspapers
 - It can report and analyse prejudice in mainstream media
 - This can help combat internalised oppression
 - It can announce community events and advertise community businesses
 - It may be used as a source of information for mainstream newspapers
- These are important services:
 - But many people perceive the difficulties more strongly than the benefits
 - They don't want to buy an “unimpressive, boring and depressing” paper
 - Because of this, community-specific newspapers are underappreciated

2. Social groups and conferences

Social groups

- Social groups for “X” people provide a safe environment for them to meet and be themselves:
 - Often, they are highly valued by people suffering from internalised oppression
- Underappreciation of a social group can occur as follows:
 - A person, Fred, regularly goes to a social group
 - Attending the group helps to reduce Fred’s internalised oppression
 - As Fred recovers, he needs the group’s support less and less
 - Eventually, when Fred has recovered enough, he leaves the group
 - Fred may misunderstand the reason he is leaving:
 - He does not realize that *he* has changed and outgrown the group
 - Instead, he thinks “the group changed and became boring”
 - This misunderstanding might make Fred reluctant to recommend the group to others

Conferences

- A local social group might have less than 20 people
 - In contrast, an annual (inter)national conference might have hundreds or thousands of people
- The larger size of a conference means its benefits are magnified:
 - Finding so many “people like me” in one place can be empowering
 - Workshops and merchandise stalls can promote the community’s history, values and role models
 - A mix of “social” and “activist” workshops provides interesting variety
 - Entertainments provided by community members provide a source of pride

Conferences (cont')

- Recall from the *Clusters, Families and Partners* chapter:
 - Occasionally, interactions between people with common interests produce synergy
- An annual conference provides opportunities for synergy:
 - A conference, by itself, can be enjoyable, informative, empowering...
 - The networking and collaborations *resulting* from people meeting at the conference can be even more important
- Conferences often suffer from the same underappreciation as social groups:
 - Eventually, Fred stops attending an annual conference
 - He does not realize that *he* has changed and outgrown the conference
 - Instead, he thinks the conference is “not as good as it used to be”
 - This misunderstanding makes Fred reluctant to recommend the conference to others

3. Document a group's history and culture

Documentation can challenge stereotypes

- Derogatory stereotypes exist about every oppressed group.

Examples:

- Lazy, unintelligent, criminals, terrorists, sexually promiscuous, rapists, child molesters, hedonists, violent

- These stereotypes can be challenged if the oppressed group documents:

- Positive aspects of their own culture
- Their achievements in science, art, music, movies, sports, business, charity, campaigning for human rights and so on
- Biographies of their people who lead eventful and interesting lives
- Anthologies of personal accounts about oppression and pride

Importance of such documentation

- They can help to raise the self esteem and lower internalised oppression of individuals *within* the oppressed group
- Documentation of recent history (last 10 or 20 years) can show progress in reducing oppression
 - This can be a morale boost to activists who do not see progress on a week-by-week basis
- Mainstream historians often fail to document the history of oppressed groups

Obstacles for such documentation

- They are rarely read by people *outside* the oppressed group
 - There are occasional exceptions, such as *Roots* by Alex Haley
- A limited readership means:
 - Many bookshops do not stock “special interest” titles that sell poorly
 - Such books quickly go out of print
- Some books have to be rewritten for each generation:
 - Anthologies of personal accounts written recently are more relevant for readers than similar anthologies written 50 years ago

Exercise (to be done outside the course)

- Look for books about an oppressed group on Amazon (www.amazon.com)
- Estimate how well or badly such books sell (Amazon's "sales rank")
- How many of these books are "unavailable" (out of print)
- Is there any way to keep such books available for future generations?
 - One possible answer is on the next slide

Suggested solution to the exercise

■ Suggestion:

- Create a website to act as a centralized archive of community-specific biographies, histories and personal accounts
- Track down the copyright holders of such books that are out of print
 - Ask them to add HTML and PDF versions of the books to the archive
- Encourage future authors of such books to do likewise (they will forego insignificant royalties to get a wider readership)

■ Bonus suggestion:

- Study *print-on-demand* technologies (ability to print and bind a single copy of a book on an as-needed basis)
- Add a print-on-demand service to the website
 - In this way, authors and the website can make some money from books that have a limited readership
- Expand the website so it covers books for *many* oppressed groups (this scalability may make it a sustainable business)

4. End reliance on your oppressor for funding

End reliance on your oppressor for funding

- An important principle to keep in mind is this:
 - Don't ask your oppressor to fund your revolution
- It may not be possible to live up to that ideal:
 - But over time you should try to reduce your reliance on funding from your oppressor
- When you accept funding from your oppressor then:
 - You may have to engage in self-censorship (otherwise the funding might be cut off)
 - You may have to deal with extra bureaucracy (to satisfy the funding organization that the money is being spent well)
 - If the funding suddenly stops, your organization may not be able to survive

Example from Black Like Me

- From the “December 7” chapter in *Black Like Me*:
 - Two black economists:
 - “recognized that so long as the Negro had to depend on white banks to finance his projects for improvement and growth, the race was at the mercy of the white man.”
 - Helped create two banks in Atlanta financed and run by black people
 - Often, white-owned banks in Atlanta refused to loan money to black people to buy houses
 - The newly created black-owned banks started to provide such loans
 - Within a few days, the white-owned banks called to say “Don’t take all that business away from us. How about letting us handle a few of those loans?”
- Important point:
 - Just two black banks broke a white-only monopoly on loans
 - This caused white-owned banks to act less oppressively

Example from John Holt

- The US Department of Education announced it would give up to \$5million per district to fund innovative schools:
 - From Chapter 12 (“The Failure of School Reform”) in *Instead of Education* by John Holt
- Results:
 - Less than 1% of schools who applied for funding received it
 - The 99% of schools who were denied funding wasted time on the bureaucracy of applying for the funds
 - When funding was given, most of the money was used to add extra bureaucracy to coordinate and evaluate the innovations
 - “The innovative schools and teachers, which in their former poverty had at least been left alone to do their work as best they could, now had to spend much of their time explaining and justifying what they were doing. Many of them felt that the federal funding had, if anything, made their work harder.”

Example from the Nation of Islam

- An important teaching of the Nation of Islam (NOI) was that black people should work towards financial independence:
- Many NOI members opened their own businesses
- In this way, money could stay within their own community, so:
 - They were reducing their financial reliance on white people
 - They were not financially supporting their oppressors

Example from Malcolm X

- This example shows that sometimes you can reduce but not eliminate your dependence on oppressors
- Malcolm X started a monthly newspaper:
 - From Chapter 5 (“The Interview”) of *To Kill a Black Man* by Louis Lomax
 - The newspaper reported stories relevant to the Nation of Islam (NOI)
- Malcolm X could not find writers or editors within the NOI:
 - He reluctantly asked Louis Lomax (a black man *not* in the NOI) who had the relevant skills to help
- There were no black-owned printing companies capable of printing the newspaper:
 - He reluctantly used a white-owned printing company

5. Ways to cope with stress caused by oppression

The excessive kindness of strangers

■ From *Black Like Me*:

- On many occasions, the author experienced kindness by black strangers
- The amount of kindness was far greater than he had experienced as a white person among white strangers
- He concluded that “the world outside was so bad for us that we had to counter it among ourselves by salving one another with kindness” (from the “November 7” chapter)

■ Such “excessive kindness” is common in oppressed groups:

- *Defiance* by Nechama Tec tells the true story of how 3 Jewish brothers in Poland saved over 1200 Jewish people from the Nazi holocaust
- Chapter 13 (“Keeping Order”) of *Defiance* states:
 - “As outside dangers increased, people became more cooperative. In contrast, as soon as they felt more secure, they became more competitive, more critical, and more disobedient.”

Using music to relieve stress

- From the “November 14” chapter in *Black Like Me*:
 - In Mississippi a black man had been lynched and the grand jury decided that the white men accused of the crime should not face trial
 - Black people felt betrayed by this blatant lack of justice
 - The author travelled to Mississippi to experience life as a black man in such circumstances

- The author arrived at the black part of the town of Hattiesburg:
 - There was loud music everywhere, and he realized white people would think black people were happy, partying and “living jubilantly”
 - He recognised the music was a way for people to relieve stress caused by oppression

Other ways to relieve stress

- Not everyone uses music and dancing to relieve stress
 - Some prefer to work out in a gym, play sports, comedy, art, ...
 - Some resort to alcohol, drugs or crime
- Many rehabilitation programs increase their success rate by having attendees take up a pastime that:
 - Relieves stress, while
 - Building self esteem or providing a purpose to life

Relieving stress productively

■ Advice:

- Engage in a stress-relieving hobby
- Tailor your hobby so that it helps your community to fight oppression

■ Examples:

- For people who like to write:
 - Write fictional stories that show oppressed people in a positive light
 - Document your community's culture, history or role models
 - Contribute to a community newspaper
- For people who like to play music:
 - Write and play songs relevant to your oppressed community
 - Write a musical stage show relevant to your community
- For artists:
 - Paint or sculpt images depicting community pride or oppression

Relieving stress productively (cont')

More examples...

- For people who like sports:
 - Learn or teach self-defence sports

- For people who like using a video camera:
 - Make a documentary about your community's history or culture

- For people who love to cook:
 - Provide catering for activist groups
 - Write a cook book of recipes associated with your community

- For people who like gardening, knitting, collecting stamps...
 - Find *some way* for your hobby to help your community

6. Summary

Summary

- Taken individually, the tactics discussed in this chapter are not impressive. For example:
 - A community-specific newspaper won't end oppression by itself
 - Likewise for a conference or an anthology of personal accounts
- Because they can appear unimpressive, many people underappreciate the importance of these tactics
- The tactics gain importance when viewed as parts of an equation for change:
 - $A + B + C$ = lessen oppression enough to enable D to occur
 - $D + E + F$ = build enough pride and self-esteem to facilitate G
 - $G + H$ = another step towards ending oppression