Polities Change, Oppression Remains:
on the Psychology and Politics of Oppression

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While both postindustrial and emerging states face economic, cultural, and political changes, the constant of oppression remains. Economically and culturally marginalized groups continue to endure untold degrees of suffering. From a moral point of view, it is imperative that social scientists attend to the needs of the oppressed. This paper examines the dynamics of oppression in postindustrial and emerging states from both a psychological and political perspective. The reality of oppression may be understood from various levels of analysis, from the macrolevel of global economic and political structures, to the microlevel of internalized psychological images of inferiority. A comprehensive analysis of oppression will emerge only from an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the political with the psychological. Otherwise, efforts to reduce conditions of oppression will be inhibited by limited perspectives that neglect either the internal or external domains. We explore some of the psychological mechanisms accounting for oppression, such as learned helplessness, internalization of hegemonic self-rejecting views, and obedience to authority. Some of the political mechanisms accounting for oppression in emerging countries include the oppressive structure of international financial systems and internal colonization. We conclude by outlining the process of conscientization *necessary to overcome conditions of oppression at all levels of analysis.*

KEY WORDS: oppression, consciousness raising, emancipation, social theory, psychological oppression, political oppression, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

While people in both postindustrial (Block, 1990) and emerging societies (Haswell & Hunt, 1991) face economic, cultural, and political changes, the constant of oppression remains. Economically and culturally marginalized groups continue to endure untold degrees of suffering. In the current social and political context, developments regarded as laudatory in some parts of the globe have resulted in increased levels of repression in others. The twin "victories" of democracy and capitalism at the end of this millennium mark the dawning of a modern euphoric fervor among those dominant social forces defining the new zeitgeist. The collapse of the Iron Curtain, the rising democratic impulse, as manifested in demands for greater human rights in China, legitimate governance in Africa, and multiparty elections in Central and South America, all represent celebrations of liberation. The simultaneous opening up of the marketplace in countries as diverse as Egypt, India, and Zambia, not to mention Eastern Europe and China, represents an additional celebration against previously closed economic systems. But the developments of the post-1989 period are generally less euphoric than the architects of the "New World Order" would have us believe. The current international finance system, for instance, locks emerging societies in a state of increased economic dependency (Rosh & Gonick, 1990). Poor children, persecuted minorities, aboriginal peoples, welfare recipients, refugees, and other marginalized peoples both in postindustrial and emerging societies continue to suffer from various degrees of stress and marginalization (Albee, Bond, & Cook-Monsey, 1992).

Both from a moral and pragmatic point of view, it is imperative that social scientists attend to the needs of the oppressed (George, 1992; Young, 1990). In a previous publication we delineated an emerging set of criteria for moral discourse in the social sciences. We proposed research and action on oppression as a core theme. The philosophical orientation we advanced positioned epistemology at the service of moral philosophy. Furthermore, we strove to permeate disciplinary boundaries and tried to increase marginal voices in public debates of morality, justice, and oppression. The discourse of oppression we envision is one that is sensitive to the unique circumstances of dominated individuals and groups, and one where research leads to the reduction and possible elimination of conditions of oppression (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994).

The reality of oppression may be understood from various levels of analysis, from the macrolevel of global economic and political structures to the microlevel of internalized psychological images of inferiority. A comprehensive analysis of oppression will emerge only from an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the political with the psychological. Otherwise, efforts to reduce conditions of oppression will be inhibited by limited perspectives that neglect either the internal or external domains. The paper explores some of the psychological mechanisms accounting for oppression, such as learned helplessness, surplus powerlessness, internalization of hegemonic self-rejecting views, and obedience to authority. Some

of the political mechanisms accounting for oppression in the political economy of postindustrial and emerging countries will also be discussed—among them, the structure of international financial capital and the domination of powerless groups by ruling social classes.

The paper has two main objectives. The first goal of this article is to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of oppression, from the intrapersonal to the international level, from both psychological and political perspectives. The second objective is to propose a minitheory to account for the acceptance or rejection of oppressive conditions. Such theory has the potential to elucidate desirable ways to eradicate repression.

DEFINING OPPRESSION, DOMINATION AND RECIPROCAL EMPOWERMENT

Oppression has been variously defined as a *state* or a *process*. As a state or outcome, oppression results "from a long-term and consistent denial of essential resources" (Watts & Abdul-Adil, in press). This situation is usually described as a state of domination where the oppressed suffer the consequences of deprivation, exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation (e.g., Bartky, 1990; Sidanius, 1993; Young, 1990). A definition of oppression as process is given by Mar'i (1988): "Oppression involves institutionalized collective and individual modes of behavior through which one group attempts to dominate and control another in order to secure political, economic, and/or social-psychological advantage" (p. 6).

Another important distinction in the definition of oppression concerns its *political* and *psychological* dimensions. Bartky (1990) realized that we cannot speak of one without the other. Psychological and political oppression co-exist and are mutually determined. In her own words,

> When we describe a people as oppressed, what we have in mind most often is an oppression that is economic and political in character. But recent liberation movements, the black liberation movement and the women's movement in particular, have brought to light forms of oppression that are not immediately economic or political. It is possible to be oppressed in ways that need involve neither deprivation, legal inequality, nor economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically—the 'psychic alienation' of which Fanon speaks. To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise dominion over their own self-esteem. Differently put, psychological oppression can be regarded as the "internalization of intimations of inferiority." (Bartky, 1990, p. 22)

Our own definition tries to integrate the elements of state *and* process, with the psychological *and* political dimensions of oppression. For us, then, *oppression entails a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subor-dination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their*

power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subor-
dinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves. It is
only when the latter can attain a certain degree of conscientization that resistance
can begin (Bartky, 1990; Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1972; Martín-Baró, 1986; Memmi,
1968; Montero, 1991; Pheterson, 1986; Wolf, 1986). Oppression, then, is a series
of asymmetric power relations between individuals, genders, classes, communities,
nations, and states. Such asymmetric power relations lead to conditions of misery,
inequality, exploitation, marginalization, and social injustices.

The dynamics of oppression are internal as well as external. External forces
deprive individuals or groups of the benefit of self-determination, distributive
justice, and democratic participation (Barret, 1986; Brittan & Maynard, 1984;
Bulhan, 1985; Weisband, 1989). Frequently, these restrictions are internalized and
operate at a psychological level as well, where the person acts as his or her personal
censor (Adam, 1978; Bosmaijan, 1983; Collier, 1977; Goldenberg, 1978; Itzin,
1985; M. Lerner, 1991; Miller & Mothner, 1981; Montero, 1991; Pheterson 1986).
Consequently, we can define political and psychological oppression as follows:

Political oppression, *which is the creation of material, legal, military, eco-
nomic, and/or other social barriers to the fulfilment of self-determination, distribu-
tive justice, and democratic participation, results from the use of multiple forms of
power by dominating agents to advance their own interests at the expense of
persons or groups in positions of relative powerlessness.*

Psychological oppression, *in turn, is the internalized view of self as negative
and as not deserving more resources or increased participation in societal affairs,
resulting from the use of affective, behavioral, cognitive, linguistic, and cultural
mechanisms designed to solidify political domination.*

Table I. Definitions of Reciprocal Empowerment, Domination, and Oppression

VALUES	RECIPROCAL EMPOWERMENT	DOMINATION	OPPRESSION
Self-Determination	Power to give to self and others equal ability to define identity	Forming own identity at expense of others	Externally produced and internalized negative view of self
Distributive justice	Power to give to self and others equal and sufficient resources	Acquiring resources at expense of others	Externally produced and internalized view of self as not deserving more resources
Collaboration and democratic participation	Power to give to self and others an equal voice in society	Having a bigger voice at expense of others	Externally produced and internalized view of own voice as unimportant

Current sociohistorical conditions in the Americas can illustrate political and
psychological oppression. An example of political oppression in Canada is the

subjugation of native peoples in the hands of white dominant groups (Richardson, 1989; York, 1989). Native peoples are engaged in a constant struggle to recover their lands and to reclaim their right to self-determination. The history of the relationship between Canada's natives and federal and provincial governments is replete with examples where the latter deprived the former of material resources and political powers. Instances of psychological oppression can be observed in the devalued sense of self many people in Latin America, who live in the shadow of rich countries like the United States, have about themselves. Under policies and conditions of colonization, many people harbor the belief that their personal and collective attributes are not as cultivated or meritorious as those of North Americans or Europeans. This is not surprising considering that the media reflect an image of local residents as underdeveloped, and educational materials neglect to appreciate the richness of native culture (Pilar Quintero, 1993). Empirical research conducted and reviewed by Pilar Quintero (1992, 1993) documents these attitudes in children as well as in adults.

In addition to integrating state and process with the political and psychological domains, our definition is given in terms of the moral values respected or violated in oppression, domination, and reciprocal empowerment. The values proposed should help us clarify not only what we should eliminate but also what we should create. We can define oppression, domination, and reciprocal empowerment in terms of the three key values of self-determination, distributive justice, and col-laboration and democratic participation. In Table I we define how the people involved in oppression, domination, and reciprocal empowerment experience or enact self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation (for a comprehensive explanation of these values, see Prilleltensky, 1994, and Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). The table helps identify the most desirable state and process of co-existence: reciprocal empowerment. Oppression, as the antithesis of reciprocal empowerment, curtails self-determination, perpetuates so-cial injustice, and suppresses the voice of vulnerable individuals. Reinharz (1994) uses the metaphor of voice to describe how women have been excluded from full participation in public life. According to her, "voice means having the ability, the means, and the right to express oneself, one's mind, and one's will. If an individual does not have these abilities, means, or right, he or she is silent" (Reinharz, 1994, p. 180). Through the use of historical and contemporary material, Reinharz shows how dominant male groups try to make women invisible and inaudible, thus depriving them of the basic rights of self-determination and participation in matters affecting their lives. Her examples include the repression of women's voices in the home, in schools, clinics, and courtrooms. Mechanisms utilized by males to deny women and girls a voice range from ignoring their opinions and withdrawing approval all the way to physical repression. As Reinharz shows, documentation corroborating the suppression of women's voices abounds. But the oppression of this group is not limited to self-expression. The denial of access to basic necessities such as food and shelter on the basis of gender discrimination is still rampant today

in many parts of the world. El-Mouelhy (1992) has recently chronicled the cruel conditions of deprivation endured by girls and women in several countries, simply by virtue of being female. Practices such as son preference, malnutrition, economic blackmail, and physical brutality condemn girls and women to lives of suffering and despair (El-Mouelhy, 1992).

To summarize, we see oppression as both a process and a dynamic state with codetermining psychological and political factors that manifest themselves in terms of self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation.

THE POLITICS AND PSYCHOLOGY OF OPPRESSION

Political and psychological oppression complement each other. Usually, there cannot be one without the other. Political, social, and economic barriers are effectively implemented and maintained not only through the use of force, fear or terror, but also through widely disseminated and largely internalized legitimizing psychological myths concerning the "just nature" of the present state of affairs (Gramsci, 1971; Sidanius, 1993). Psychological oppression, in turn, has a concrete material basis; it does not derive exclusively from the inner workings of mental life. Images of personal inferiority are formed following experiences of shame and humiliation that erode self-confidence. In other words, psychological oppression is grounded in actual instances of political oppression. These expressions of political oppression need not be blatant or necessarily traumatic in order for psychological oppression to develop (Young, 1990). Small daily doses of personal devaluation usually suffice.

In understanding the dynamics of oppression, it is important to realize that a host of psychological and political mechanisms operate at all levels of analysis (see Table II). Furthermore, it is crucial to explore the unique and combined effects of these processes. The list provided in Table II is not exhaustive but merely illustrative of salient mechanisms. We will present some of the most prominent psychological and political principles involved in the creation and perpetuation of conditions of oppression. While some of them apply to more than one level, others exert a particularly strong impact at a single level.

According to our definition of psychological oppression, the main feature of this state is the internalization of negative conceptions of the self. The *intrapersonal level* refers to dynamics operating within the single individual. Beginning at this level, we identify a number of psychological processes contributing to this situation. Among them, learned helplessness, surplus powerlessness, obedience to authority, and internalization of images of inferiority. These are well-documented mechanisms that psychologically affect the individual experiencing domination. In effect, these are the product of the oppressing forces of other people, social groups, and state agencies. Following exposure to innumerable devaluing encounters, people internalize the negative images projected onto them by dominating forces.

Table II. Political and Psychological Dynamics of Oppression

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS	POLITICAL DYNAMICS	PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS
Intrapersonal	• Acts of identification with the aggressor • Self-induced harm • Suicidal behavior	• Internalization of inferior identity • Belief in just world • Surplus powerlessness • Learned helplessness, apathy, and despair • Pessimistic explanatory style • Conformity, compliance, and obedience to authority
Interpersonal	• Restricted life-chances • Actual or potential use of force against oppressed • Aggregated individual and institutional discrimination • Restricted opportunities to challenge authority	• Inferiorization and devaluation • Verbal or emotional abuse • Self-fulfilling prophecy • Shaping of behavior • Passivity of bystanders
Social groups	• Restricted life-chances • Actual or potential use of force against oppressed • Aggregated individual and institutional discrimination • Restricted opportunities to challenge authority • Fragmentation of oppressed community	• Collective identity of inferiority • Deference to dominating group • Inferiorization and devaluation by dominating groups • Legitimizing myths • Belief in just world • Ingroup-outgroup discrimination • Groupthink • Moral exclusion • Dehumanization of victims of oppression • Passivity of bystanders
State	• Restricted life-chances • Actual or potential use of force against oppressed • Systemic domination • Internal colonialism • Aggregated institutional discrimination • Restricted opportunities to challenge authority • Fragmentation of oppressed community	• Inferiorization and devaluation by state agencies • Deference to state agencies • Legitimizing myths • Belief in just world • Ingroup-outgroup discrimination • Moral exclusion • Dehumanization of victims of oppression • Passivity of bystanders
International	• Structural dependency • Restricted opportunities for development of nation • Actual or potential use of force against oppressed nation • Aggregated international discrimination	• Collective learned helplessness and compliance • Inferiorization and devaluation by other nations • Deference to powerful nations • Legitimizing myths • Ingroup-outgroup discrimination • Moral exclusion • Dehumanization of victims of oppression • Passivity of bystander nations

Members of discriminated groups testify to that effect (Adam, 1978; Bulhan, 1985; Memmi, 1967, 1968; Miller & Mothner, 1981; Pheterson, 1986; Pilar Quintero, 1993; Woolley, 1993). As a deaf author confirmed, "we are oppressed from without by a society which does not value us and therefore does not give priority to our needs, and we are oppressed from within because we have internalised those same attitudes towards ourselves" (Woolley, 1993, p. 81).

The feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness internalized by victims of child sexual abuse are painful reminders of the susceptibility of vulnerable groups to negative judgments imposed on them by perpetrators. These negative messages, incorporated into the child's self-image, have multiple and enduring ill effects for the mental health of victims (Bagley & King, 1990; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986).

In certain cases, the victims of domination come to accept their fate as part of their just-world view, according to which "people get what they deserve" (M.J. Lerner, 1980). Hence, there "must be a reason" for them to be punished. This type of thinking characterizes oppressors and oppressed alike, aiding the former to rationalize their unjust acts, and the latter to make sense of their misfortune. It is of interest to note that in research examining people's views about poverty, "individualistic factors were thought much more important than structural . . . factors in explaining why people were poor" (Huber & Form, 1973, p. 101). A more recent study of unemployed managers in the United States found that although they were the victims of global economic trends, they tended to blame themselves for not having a job (Newman, 1988).

Learned helplessness, which refers to the state of passivity developed in response to repeated experiences of failure (Seligman, 1975), helps solidify apathy toward adverse living circumstances. Feelings of hopelessness are reinforced when people explain their misfortune in terms of personal inadequacies and regard their suffering as pervading their entire lives, both in the present and the future. This cognitive approach, called a *pessimistic explanatory style* (Seligman, 1990), is fostered by repeated instances of failure, which in turn, cyclically promote a learned helplessness response. A related mechanism, *surplus powerlessness,* pertains to feelings of personal impotence beyond and above the actual limitations placed on the individual by the social context. This observation explains why people do not object to oppression even when they might have an opportunity to alleviate or terminate it (M. Lerner, 1991). Chances are that individuals develop surplus powerlessness in conjunction with learned helplessness. Witnessing the ineffectiveness of their actions in prior attempts to reduce the pain very likely spurs the emergence of learned helplessness and surplus powerlessness.

A strong desire to conform characterizes most human beings. Under certain circumstances, primarily when there is a penalty for disobeying, compliance with the dominant social order is typical (Asch, 1981; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Milgram, 1963; Miller, 1986), even if the social order proves to be oppressive to the self, family or one's own community (Adam, 1978; Baker Miller, 1986; Bulhan, 1985; Mar'i, 1988; Pheterson, 1986; Staub, 1989). This is where the link between

psychological and political oppression is most obvious, as conformity and obedi-
ence to authority are usually rewarded and deviance is frequently penalized
(Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Mar'i, 1988).

At the intrapersonal level of analysis, the political dynamics may be concep-
tualized along a continuum of personal harm. At one end of the continuum we may
notice minor acts of identification with the oppressor, whereby the victim engages
in behavior that is seemingly self-defeating, or at the very least constraining (Adam,
1978; Fanon, 1963). Moving along the continuum, people may harm themselves
in numerous ways, such as causing bodily injury or creating reasons to be fired
from a satisfying job. At the end of this path there is suicidal behavior, which may
be regarded as the ultimate expression of intrapersonal oppression.

As noted earlier, the political and psychological dimensions of oppression are
reciprocally determined. It is easy to see the interacting effects of learned helpless-
ness, apathy, depression, and self-induced harm. At the same time, the psychologi-
cal moment of oppression at the intrapersonal level is intimately connected to the
political dynamics at the interpersonal level, as conceptions of personal inferiority
are reinforced by experiences of discrimination, and attempts to challenge authority
may be thwarted by the use of force (M. Lerner, 1991; Mar'i, 1988; Young, 1990).

The focus of attention at the interpersonal level of analysis is how oppression
is created and reproduced among people in close relationships. Common ways of
interpersonal oppression are verbal or emotional abuse, where the target individual
is subjected to degrading language and portrayed as useless, inferior, incapable,
lazy, unlovable, stupid, and a litany of other demeaning adjectives. Accompanying
the verbal abuse there is usually emotional abuse, whereby the victim is denied
primary psychological goods such as love, care, nurturing, friendships, support,
and compassion (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Sadeler, 1994). The psychological abuse
is intensified by the threat of physical force (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman,
1994; Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993). Furthermore, the person in control may
restrict the life chances of the powerless, as is the case of parents or abusive
husbands who prohibit their children or spouses to leave the house, socialize, or get
an education (Sadeler, 1994).

The internalization of an inferior identity stems not only from explicit verbal
abuse, but also from subtle stratagems such as negative expectations of the person.
The well-known phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies solidifies internal op-
pression. When the prophecies are negative, the people are adversely affected
(Cooper & Good, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Ethnic minorities (Collier,
1977; Hodge, 1975; Turner & Singleton, 1978), women (Baker Miller, 1986;
Barret, 1986; Brittan & Maynard, 1984), homosexuals (Adam, 1978), disabled
individuals (Abberley, 1987, Woolley, 1993), aboriginal people (Bennett, 1987),
the poor (Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), and the colonized (Bulhan,
1985; Fanon, 1963) suffer the harsh consequences of internalized negative expec-
tations. Kallen (1989) suggested that the internalization by the powerless of the

degrading attributes ascribed to them by the powerful serves to perpetuate the self-fulfilling cycle of oppression.

The role of bystanders is worth noting in this context. Staub (1989) suggested that a passive stance on the part of bystanders actually contributes to the oppression of innocent victims. In this case, dominating agents see no need to stop their repressive acts, as they encounter no opposition to their behavior, however morally objectionable it may be. This psychological principle is reminiscent of the Latin maxim *Qui tacit consentit,* as no action constitutes an act in support of the status quo.

At the social level of analysis, we concentrate on the oppression experienced by vulnerable groups. Although no group is completely homogeneous, there are certain characteristics people share that put them in a position of relative disadvantage vis-à-vis more powerful collectives. Groups experiencing domination and discrimination are subject to consequential political restrictions (Young, 1990). In addition to a limited range of life opportunities, such as poor education and exclusion from desirable employment, people with a history of oppression can be reluctant to challenge authority. Control agencies for the powerful also tend to fragment oppressed groups, thereby impeding their creation of political organizations capable of launching meaningful threats to their hegemonic domination (Adam, 1978). Empowerment literature describes how forming support and political structures is a crucial step in overcoming oppression (Kieffer, 1984; Lord & Hutchinson, 1993).

Similar to the effects of oppressive dynamics on individuals, groups can also develop collective identities of inferiority (Adam, 1978; Fanon, 1963; Montero, 1984; Pilar Quintero, 1992; 1993). They sometimes even respond to their oppressors with deference, ascribing them moral superiority (Sidanius, 1993; Staub, 1989). When this is the case, this response is likely to be motivated by a belief in a just world. Sidanius (1993) documented the numerous legitimizing myths employed by the powerful to subdue minorities. He defines legitimizing myths as "attitudes, values, beliefs, or ideologies that provide moral and intellectual support to and justification for the group-based hierarchial social structure and the unequal distribution of value in social systems" (Sidanius, 1993, p. 207). In essence, these myths are variations of two forms of hegemonic inculcation: personal blame and natural causes. Personal blame messages convey to the oppressed the idea that they are to blame for their misfortune, whereas natural causes explain away their suffering as inevitable and as the result of higher powers, beyond anybody's control (Prilleltensky, 1994).

Once an oppressed group is defined as lower and disreputable, a number of social psychological dynamics develop. Ingroup-outgroup thinking tends to exacerbate perceived dfferences between groups, usually resulting in increased degrees of discrimination (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Staub, 1989). Favorable ingroup and unfavourable outgroup biases are reinforced by groupthink, the phenomenon whereby morally intolerable views become accepted as part of the self-enhancing process of the group (Janis, 1972). Groupthink is characterized by simplistic

analyses of people and situations, which sustain the legitimizing myths presented above. By portraying members of subordinate groups as undeserving, agents of domination morally exclude them from norms of behavior that the agents would apply to themselves. In other words, oppressors do not feel bound to behave toward dominated groups in ethical ways because they exclude these collectives from the realm of moral discourse altogether (Opotow, 1990). This phenomenon leads to the dehumanization of victims, whereby perpetrators of violence or injustice cease to regard their victims as human beings, thereby detaching themselves from the torment and agony caused by their own actions (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Staub, 1989).

In a manner similar to instances of interpersonal oppression, bystanders can affect the behavior of groups. They can be instrumental in hindering or facilitating moral exclusion, groupthink, ingroup-outgroup mentality, and the dehumanization of victims (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Staub, 1989). By objecting to discriminatory practices, bystanders have a chance to obstruct destructive processes. Conversely, their tacit approval can encourage morally reprehensible behavior (Staub, 1989).

At the state level of analysis there are multiple forms of oppressive structures, practices, and norms. Our treatment here focuses on the capacity of the state to enhance human dignity and protect human rights. If civilized life requires the protection afforded by the state, then the state must help its citizenry realize its higher needs and aspirations. This is the *raison d'état.* While states ought to enhance the rights of human beings within their jurisdiction, they do not always do so. In fact, some governments become the greatest violators of the right of individuals and communities within their control (Staub, 1989). Some contemporary examples include the repression of national minorities (Kallen, 1989; Richardson, 1989) and the complete disregard for the rights of children (Gross & Gross, 1977; Prilleltensky, 1994).

Contrary to a tradition that speaks of nation states, most modern states are multination states. That is, they comprise dominant and dominated national groupings. The pursuit of greater freedoms for populations like the Kurds in Iraq, Muslims in Bosnia, and Tibetans in China have all been ruthlessly suppressed. The use of force by the Canadian state apparatus against aboriginal peoples at Oka, the Mexican military campaign in Chiapas, the government of India against Sikhs at the Golden Temple at Amritsar, and the British forces suppressing Irish separatism in Northern Ireland are all attempts to curtail the self-determination of minorities.

In deeply divided societies, the superordinate status group, usually in control of the state apparatus, can rely on complex modalities of control that restrict the life opportunities of minorities (Lustick, 1980). Systemic and institutionalized dominance (Kuper, 1977), as well as policies of internal colonialism (Hechter, 1977; Pilar Quintero, 1993; Wolpe, 1975) tighten the political oppression of officially designated outgroups.

At the international level of analysis we focus on the relations between international financial institutions and domestic economic and political actors and

on interstate conflict. Developments in Africa should help us understand the consequences of oppression at the international stage. What was once called a condition of structural dependency or underdevelopment in the literature has evolved into a condition of "Afro-pessimism" (Davidson, 1992). The workings of the interstate system and the international monetary system are seen to have permanently depressed the economies of the Third World in general and Africa in particular. This sense of collective learned helplessness is one important manifestation of the structures of domination and oppression present at the international level. While it may be true that the international monetary system is no longer under imminent threat of collapse as a result of the $1.8 trillion Third World debt, the debt question is, in the minds of many, the only question of consequence facing many emerging economies around the world.

Another manifestation of oppression at the international level concerns the codified rules of international trade regimes like the recently concluded Uruguay Round. The new World Trade Organization superseding the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) has created a collective sense of surplus powerlessness among many in emerging areas. The feeling of collective impotence is informed by a sense that the rules of international exchange are fundamentally stacked against the interests of the South. The cry to resist the domination of the international financial system, expressed in calls for a New International Economic Order (Cox, 1979), has been transformed into compliant behavior, as countries line up and offer conforming narratives to the World Bank and other powerful institutions.

A third and final example of political oppression at the international level can be seen in the international mobilization of armies of mass destruction and other less ominous foreign policy instruments ready to selectively implement international norms of behavior. Historical examples include the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and American interference in Chile and Guatemala, as well as the embargo against Cuba. The intended result is not only compliant behavior but a warning to other would-be aberrant states that the threats of the dominant rulers in the interstate system are credible.

At this point we are unable to tell, nor are we sure it can be found out, which mechanisms are more prevalent in different situations of oppression. Chances are these political and psychological dynamics interact in multiple and fluid ways that are difficult to model. For the purposes of action, however, we believe we know enough about the phenomenon of oppression to advance a few postulates. To these we turn now.

OVERCOMING OPPRESSION

Having detailed the political and psychological factors shaping conditions of oppression, we need to apply this knowledge to try to eliminate unjust social policies and practices. We believe it is useful to integrate our analysis of psychological and

political dimensions of oppression with the literature on *conscientization.* Basing themselves largely on the work of Paulo Freire (1972, 1975), authors have defined conscientization as the process whereby individuals and groups achieve an illuminating awareness of the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and psychological factors that determine their lives and their capacity to transform that reality (Mar'i, 1988; Montero, 1991; Prilleltensky, 1994; Serrano García & Lopez Sanchez, 1992; Watts & Abdul-Adil, in press). This state of increased social awareness develops in stages. Although the phases are not entirely discrete, Watts and Abdul-Adil (in press) suggest that there is a sequential order to the evolution of critical consciousness. The five stages presented by them are as follows:

1. *Acritical stage*: At this phase people are unaware of power inequalities and their impact on their lives. The belief in a just world prevails. Oppressed individuals accept the legitimizing myths of personal blame and natural causes.

2. *Adaptive stage*: There is an acknowledgment of power differentials, but the social structure is perceived to be immutable. People try to adapt and benefit from whatever rewards the system can offer.

3. *Pre-critical stage*: There is an emerging understanding of asymmetric power relations and their adverse effects on the lives of the oppressed. During this stage people question the need to adapt to the system.

4. *Critical stage*: There is a deeper realization of the sources of oppression, accompanied by the impulse to work toward social change and a more equitable distribution of resources in society.

5. *Liberation stage*: The experience of oppression becomes obvious. The newly acquired awareness of the sources of disempowerment is followed by involvement in social and political action to eradicate personal and social injustice.

Even though Watts and Abdul-Adil (in press) utilize this model to chart primarily the development of critical awareness at the sociopolitical level, the model can be usefully adopted to portray the perception of interpersonal oppression as well. Thus, we can apply the developmental approach to all the levels of analysis presented in Table II. In our view, it can be helpful to conceptualize the evolution of critical consciousness in terms of the relationship between the psychological and political dynamics of oppression. Based on our definition of political and psychological oppression proposed earlier, we suggest that the level of critical awareness of a person or group will vary according to the extent that psychological mechanisms obscure or mask the external political sources of oppression. In other words, the more people internalize oppression, through the various psychological processes depicted above, the less will they see their suffering as resulting from unjust political conditions, and the lower they will be in the scale of critical awareness. Thus, in the acritical stage, the internalized psychological oppression will almost

completely obscure the political roots and dynamics of oppression. We can envision a gradual clearing of the political eclipse until there is a translucent discernment of this sphere in the liberation stage. Figure 1 depicts the various degrees of political obscurity in the five stages of critical consciousness.

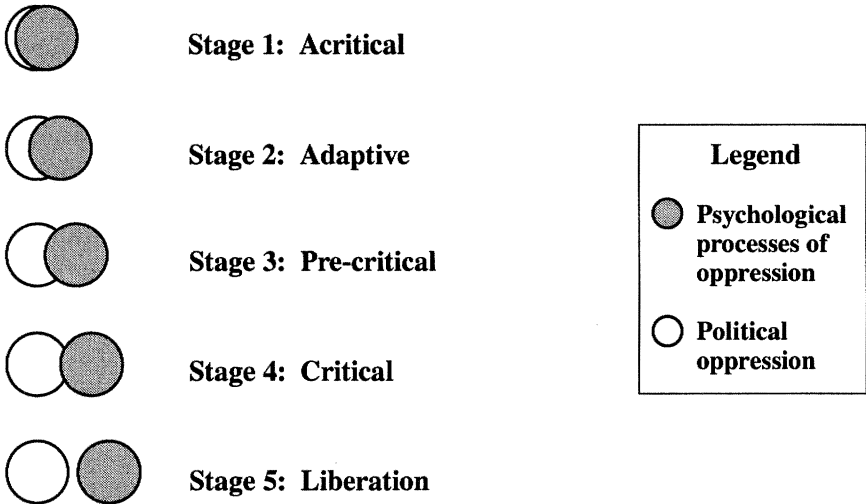Research on the process of empowerment indicates that individuals do not

Stage 1: Acritical

Stage 2: Adaptive

Stage 3: Pre-critical

Stage 4: Critical

Stage 5: Liberation

Legend

Psychological processes of oppression

Political oppression

Figure 1: Masking of political oppression by psychological processes at different stages of critical consciousness

engage in emancipatory actions until they have gained considerable awareness of their own oppression (Kieffer, 1984; Lord & Hutchinson, 1993). Consequently, the task of overcoming oppression should start with a process of psychopolitical education. It is through this kind of education that those subjected to conditions of injustice and inequality uncover the sources of their diminished quality of life (Martin-Baró, 1986; Montero, 1984). The research by Lord and Hutchison (1993) lends support to the hypothesized changes taking place during the pre-critical and critical stages. According to the authors, people experiencing powerlessness use information about their oppressed state as an impetus to empowerment. Some participants in their study indicated that new information was meaningful to their initial process of change. "Information that was most useful included: information on rights and choices, insights into participants' own strengths, information about the people who had abused them, (and) taking a course about women's issues" (Lord & Hutchison, 1993, pp. 12–13).

The literature also shows that critical consciousness is usually stimulated or reinforced by collective action. The emergence of a disability culture in North America, for example, facilitated a change in disabled people's perceptions of their oppression, constituting a "shift in their personal identities, from internalized devaluation to positive evaluation of disability-related experiences. In some situations, belief in a disability culture serves as the basis for political-group empowerment" (Scheer, 1994, p. 246). Kieffer (1984) and Lord and Hutchison (1993) identifed support from people as a key ingredient in the evolution of an emancipatory mentality in people experiencing powerlessness. People in helpful capacities served as mentors and role models and offered practical and moral support.

As D'Augelli (1994) argued, many individuals suffering oppression because of their sexual orientation go through several of the critical consciousness stages delineated above. D'Augelli claims that for many of them empowerment means the adoption of a critical stance toward oppressive societal norms.

> To be empowered as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person involves awareness of the structure of heterosexism, the nature of relevant laws and policies, and the limits of freedom and exploration. To be lesbian, gay, or bisexual in the fullest sense—to have a meaningful identity—leads to a consciousness of the history of one's own oppression. It also, generally, leads to an appreciation of how the oppression continues, and a commitment to resisting it. (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 328)

As we can see from the experiences of oppression and empowerment of diverse groups, a person struggling with powerlessness typically benefits from the enlightenment attained during the critical and liberation stages. But there are, of course, limits to the usefulness of this model. In totalitarian states, an enhanced appreciation for the causes of suffering may be of little help, as the person threatening the state is in physical danger. Therefore, emancipatory actions may be completely repressed. Similarly, in cases of domestic abuse, children and women may be physically punished for challenging the domination of an abusive father. We believe, however, that increased knowledge is the first step in coping with and changing oppressive conditions.

The concept of critical consciousness can be applied to all the levels of analysis presented in Table II. We can speak of the level of critical awareness of a person, group, or even possibly a nation (see Martín-Baró, 1986; Montero, 1984). In addition, each unit of analysis—person, group, or nation—may be at different stages of critical awareness development with respect to diverse oppressing agents. If we take for example the smallest unit of analysis, a person, this individual can be very aware of oppressive dynamics at the interpersonal level, but may be completely unaware of subjugating forces operating at the level of social class or state. In Figure 2 this is exemplified by the higher degree of coverage of the political realm by the psychological at the state level and the lower degree of coverage at the interpersonal level. We should not forget that the person also struggles with intrapersonal dynamics of oppression, which in this case in Figure 2 are characterized
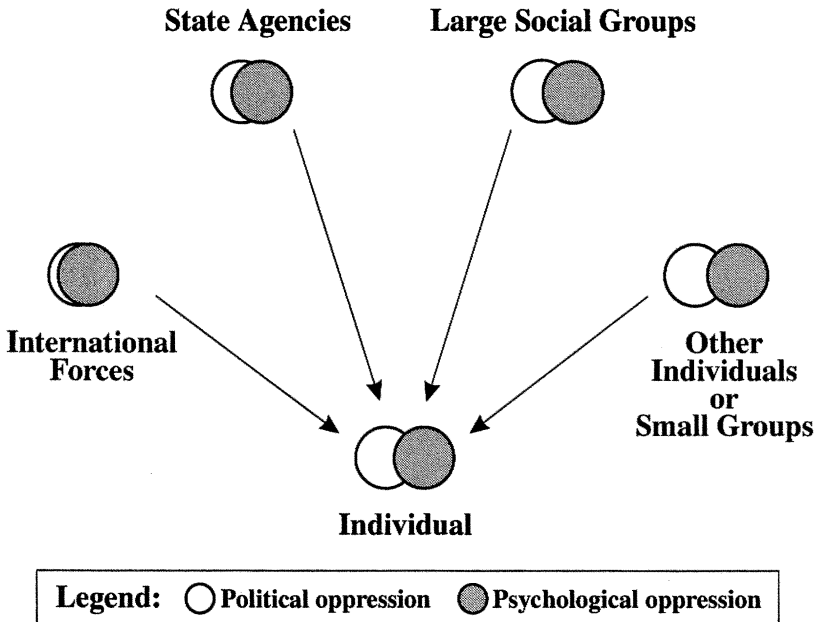
Figure 2: A person's potential perceptions of oppression from various sources

by a considerable degree of awareness, as illustrated by the relatively large clearing of the political sphere.

In our model, the most likely forms of oppression devolve from the largest units, international powers such as superpowers and international governing bodies, to the smallest unit, the individual. Thus, we can see in Figure 3 that international forces exert influence on states, large and small social groups, and the individual. The largest possible oppressive unit, powerful states, can oppress all the other smaller units. Next, states can oppress the smaller units, social groups and individuals, but cannot dominate the largest unit of powerful states at the international arena. Although there are instances where social groups can exert impressive influence on states, and small groups can pressure large groups, we think that for the most part the larger units control the smaller ones.

In Figure 3 we present an illustration of how the relatively larger units exert influence on the smaller ones. Each unit of analysis, person, groups, states, can be at a different stage of critical awareness with respect to the other units. The arrows indicate the direction of the oppressive forces. We see no arrows departing from the smaller unit because individuals do not typically oppress groups or states. We see four arrows coming from the largest unit because it is the one with power to oppress all the subordinate levels.

Figure 3 shows possible perceptions of oppression from the point of view of various agents or entities. The degree of concealment of the political by the
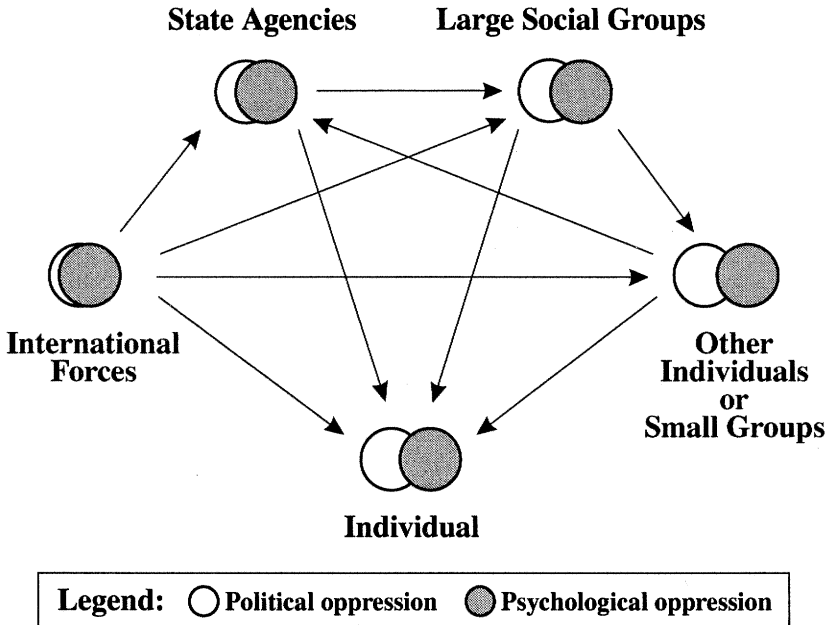
State Agencies   Large Social Groups

International   Other
Forces   Individuals
                                                          or
                                                  Small Groups

Individual

Legend: ◯ Political oppression   ◉ Psychological oppression

Figure 3: Potential configuration of perceptions of oppression by various agents or entities

psychological realm in each instance depends on the perceptions of the oppressed person or group, perceptions which are, in turn, influenced by efforts of oppressive agents to mask actual oppression. The extent to which individuals or groups perceive actual oppression is related to the overt or covert efforts of dominating agents. Although there is not a perfect correlation, the more covert are the efforts, the lower people will be in the critical consciousness scale. That is, they will be less conscious of political oppression. In totalitarian situations where terror is utilized, the oppression will be obvious but still people will not act on emancipatory impulses because of fear and intimidation.

As noted, each agent or entity in this model can be the subject of oppression by larger forces and can in turn dominate weaker entities. For example, developing states are subject to the oppressive rules of international financial organizations but can exert considerable domination over social classes and their own citizens. Similarly, certain social groups can be subjugated by more powerful ones at the same time that they exert tyrannical power over more vulnerable collectives.

In this illustration, the person is fairly aware of sources of oppression at the interpersonal level, as demonstrated by the almost uncovered political circle of oppression. However, this individual is not aware of potential oppressive forces operating at the state and international levels, hence the almost covered political circles at these levels. If we examine the large social groups, we see that they can perceive themselves as oppressed by the state and by international dynamics.

Furthermore, they can be oppressed by other groups. The model can serve to understand the oppressive forces operating at any one of the levels depicted in the figure.

Moreover, we can expand this model to portray conflict among parallel entities at the same level. Thus, for example, we can envision arrows extending from each level to similar counterparts. In the case of small groups, we can graph the power imbalances among various subgroups, dyads, and the like. In essence, then, the unit of analysis can vary according to the primary interests of research and action.

CONCLUSION

As we try to develop an epistemology at the service of moral philosophy, understanding the dynamics of oppression is an essential building block. In this paper we have sought to develop a dynamic taxonomy of the interconnectedness of many levels of analysis that join to define the condition of oppression. We started with a heuristic division between political and psychological definitions of oppression. We then introduced five levels of analysis—intrapersonal, interpersonal, social groups, state, and international. It is our position that this conceptualization helps to define the political and psychological dynamics at play at each of these levels of analysis. As suggested in Figures 1, 2 and 3, actual forms and experiences of oppression are never as neat and discrete as suggested in the heuristic exercise. It is further important to underscore that the stages of critical consciousness illustrated in Figure 1 are dynamic and even potentially cyclical. The process of national liberation struggle in many emerging societies follows the five stages outlined in the figure, but it is significant to note that new forms of political and psychological oppression confront the post-liberation society.

To better understand the dynamics outlined in this paper there is a need to develop a series of detailed case studies set in both postindustrial and emerging societies. It is our view that our theoretical constructs can be better formulated by applying our framework to the lived experience of people. We expect that both our conceptual framework and our orientation toward policy interventions would be refined as a result of empirical studies.

We see the major potential of this research project in the eventual application of knowledge to reduce conditions of oppression. The development of critical consciousness programs at all levels of the educational system is a tantalizing possibility. Oppression, as we have documented in this paper, occurs at all levels of human interaction. Therefore, individuals should benefit from a clear under-standing of dominating forces restricting their self-determination, their deserved share of social resources, and their voice in society. Conscientization is never enough, but it is nevertheless a sine qua non condition of personal emancipation and reciprocal empowerment.

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