Psychology of the Oppressed: Viewpoints

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## Introduction

This essay is the author's viewpoints emerged from reading four books entitled as follows: "*Black feminist thought*" (Collins, 2008); "*An indigenous peoples history of the United States*" (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014); "*Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*" (Omi & Winant, 2014); and "*Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking*" (Valencia, 2010). All books encompass sociological, political, and historical discussions regarding power relationships (Collins, 2008; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Omi & Winant; 2014; Valencia, 2010). Collins (2008) mentions racial discrimination of the Black women and the importance of self-defined knowledge. Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) writes about indigenous peoples' historical subjugation, genocide, and lands seizure. Omi and Winant (2014) discusses socially evolving racial constructions used to justify inequalities. Finally, Valencia (2010) criticizes deficit thoughts that contribute to students' academic failure and how the deficit thoughts, including genetic pathology, culture of poverty, and at-risk model, marginalize students. The common part in all these readings is dehumanization. In my opinion, the books do not address psychological impacts of oppression on behavior, feelings, attitudes, and thoughts. This essay discusses psychological influences and processes resulted from oppression that affect the personality, behaviors, and the mind of the oppressed individuals.

## Psychological Characteristics of the Oppressed

Social, cultural, and economic structures impact the micro-level behavior of individuals, and mutually, individuals' behavior affects social structures, for example through sustaining the oppression (Ratner, 1994; Makki Alamdari & Bishop, 2020). Social oppression has effects on individuals in terms of perception, cognition, morals, emotions, aesthetics, and reasoning. These psychological effects are value-based. That is, the effects are not disorders such as schizophrenia or low educational performance (Ratner, 2011). Ratner (2011) points out to examples of the value-based psychological effects such as believing superficial and biased news, accepting punitive and fundamentalist religious thoughts, conforming to power and theological dogma, obeying the superordinate at work, endorsing the interests of the elite, becoming obsequious, irrationality, lacking critical thought, working with limited capacity, sensational and crude aesthetic taste, and enjoying vicious entertainments. Further, the oppression causes neglect about individuals' aptitudes and limits people's power and abilities (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Adorno, 1978; Ratner, 2011). Social structures such as oppression affect individuals' behavior and mind through a variety of processes including

social learning, internalization, labeling, defense mechanisms, and fear of being judged (Akers, 2011; Driskell & Salas, 2013; Lakey & Lakey, 1998; Muenster & Lotto, 2013; Smith, Mackie & Claypool, 2014; Thoits, 2013).

As Akers (2011) argues, social learning theory can explain the interrelated connections among cognition, environment, and behavior. The theory developed by Bandura in 1963 demonstrates that individuals learn behaviors through cognitive processes and in social context. Observation of behaviors or behaviors' consequences provides patterns for action. Rewards, punishments, and consequences reinforce the behavior (Akers, 2011). In this case, when people in the oppressive society observe that the oppressors get benefits from oppression, the people learn and are encouraged to join the oppressors and repeating their behaviors to get the benefits. Obeying and endorsing superordinate, loyalty to superior, and obsequious behaviors (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Ratner, 2011) might be the results of the social learning.

In addition, according to social learning theory, observing social behaviors provides patterns for individuals' action (Akers, 2011). People learn that there are inevitable inequality and power hierarchies in relationships. If people are in the oppressor position, they continue the oppressive behaviors without questioning. When people are in the oppressed position; first, they may oppress the people who are more powerless than them. Second, the oppressed people accept and internalize the oppression. When people accept oppressive and hierarchical structure, they believe fate and punitive theological beliefs (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Ratner, 2011).

Internalizing the oppression is another process through which social structures impact individuals' micro-level behavior. It is so important to look at how the oppressed participate in the oppression. Internalized oppression is a concept indicating that the oppressed believe and act the stereotypes created about them (Lakey & Lakey, 1998). Self-hate is the result of this internalization. Lakey and Lakey (1998) argue that the internalized oppression affects the oppressed groups in different ways. Damaged self-respect, negative attacks on leaders, divisive behavior, fault-finding manner, complaining, backbiting, fierce criticism, expecting win/lose situations, and pessimism are some of the characteristics affecting the oppressed through internalized oppression (Lakey & Lakey, 1998).

Labeling theory is another conceptual framework helpful to explain the socio-psychological processes experienced in an oppressive society. Labeling is a similar process to internalizing and stereotyping. The roots of the theory is in social constructionism and symbolic interaction theory. Taylor, Walton, and Young (2013) explain that social labels shape behaviors and self-identity. Labels are terms used to describe people's attributes. Sometimes in the

society, negative labels are used for minorities or for people considered as "the others (Collins, 2008)." The others as mentioned by Collins (2008) are those people who are not a dominant category of the society. The dominant category is often the White men, and people other than the White men have been seen as inferior. Labels change individuals' behavior, self-perception, and identity (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 2013; Thoits, 2013).

Another socio-psychological process contributing to shaping behaviors is the humiliation and revenge (Muenster & Lotto, 2013). Muenster and Lotto (2013) in *Psychology of Humiliation and Revenge* discuss that quite negative emotions lead people who experience oppression to generate violence to address injustice. Appetite to revenge emerges when individuals or groups think they are neglected or treated as the others (Muenster & Lotto, 2013). Working with limited capacities at work place is a type of revenge and one of behavioral reactions to oppression as mentioned by Ratner (2011).

Further, there are defense mechanisms frequently discussed in psychological texts. Psychological defense is an internal mechanism which is employed by individuals to reduce the negative emotional effects. Defense mechanisms could be applied to address negative social-emotional effects happening in social interactions. When people feel threatened or unpleasant, they unconsciously use the mechanisms to feel better (Driskell & Salas, 2013; Smith et al., 2014). In this author's opinion, in the oppressive society, when people are treated as the others, they have fear of being judged, and therefore, they take guard against being judged by other people by hiding their identity, thoughts, interests, and feelings. The guard is a defense mechanism (Driskell & Salas, 2013). In the class, when the African-American students talked that they behave differently in home compared to work place, I understood them. They told that they listen to different music or talk differently at home. This is similar to my country, in which minority ethnicities try to hide their identity to prevent from being judged and labeled.

## Conclusion

In social work, there is a theory on social justice in terms of psychological goods developed by Wakefield in 1988. Theory of Wakefield is built upon the Rawls' theory of distributive justice. Rawls (1999) denotes the importance of both material goods and nonmaterial social goods such as power, opportunity, and social-respect on the distribution of justice. He explains them as social minimum goods. Justice means availability of minimum for each person, not maximizing the benefits (Rawls, 1999). Wakefield advances this idea to psychological attributes (Wakefield, 1988a). He mentions that as wealth is the result of social cooperation, and therefore, it should be the subject of distribution; there is psychological goods,

which are the result of social interactions and relationships, and thus, they should be the subject of justice distribution, too. Psychological goods are necessary for people to get their life plan and goals (Wakefield, 1988a). Wakefield (1988b) highlights psychological goods like self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-knowledge, problem-solving skills, assertiveness, self-organization, and social skills. The aim of these psychological goods is not treatment of mental disorder, but the aim is to provide individuals with advantages for using opportunities. Psychological attributes are important, because they help individuals get the minimum and basic social goods (Wakefield, 1988b).

The psychological goods mentioned by Wakefield are essential, but in my idea, his list is not a comprehensive one. For example, it does not address the socio-psychological effects of an oppressive society. The abovementioned cultural, behavioral, and psychological effects emerged from oppression violate the human dignity and freedom, make individuals contradictory, unrealistic, and violent beings and prevent them from growing their potentials. These psychological effects are as important as self-esteem, self-confidence and problem-solving skills mentioned by Wakefield. Therefore, I think it is crucial to revise the concept of justice in terms of psychology.

Finally, although the oppressors largely benefit from oppression as they sustain status quo, not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors suffer from the consequences. The world will become a better place for all people if the oppression is eradicated. Overcoming oppression needs a long process of emancipation and is necessary for social change. To address the psychological effects of oppression, acting at the personal level is not enough (Makki Alamdari & Jalaiepour, 2014). The social causes at the macro level have to be targeted (Lakey & Lakey, 1998; Ratner, 2011). In this case, increasing awareness about the psychological effects of the oppression is fundamental to get emancipation (Freire, 1993).

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