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Genetic Oppression

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What is the origin of oppression? Why do we hear so much about it from some circles, and yet can rarely identify it when it confronts us in our everyday lives? Charlie Manter and I, April Maltz, set out to answer this question within the context of our Honors Seminar, Gender, Sex, Race, and Marginalized Communities. We focused on rhetorically analyzing oppression as it occurs in American society using Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory, which states that our reality is represented through the use of symbols and that it is created by the terministic screens through which we view these symbols and by drawing on Tracy Ore and Marilyn Frye's theories of oppression. Tracy Ore claims that oppression is institutionalized, and that there are five types of institutional oppression: family, media, education, state and public policy, and economy. The institutional oppression creates the framework for interpersonal and internalized oppression, with interpersonal speaking about actions taken against an individual and internalized referring to the identification with the negative stimuli of the surrounding oppression and absorbing it as self-image even as it is against self-betterment. Frye speaks on these levels of oppression as through a macro and micro lens: when one looks from within the system, one cannot see the bars that hold them, but when one steps away from the institution, the cage becomes clear. In employing these theories, we have created three birdcages each nested within



the other, like the matoyshka dolls, commonly referred to as Russian dolls. The arrangement from outermost to innermost is: institutional, interpersonal, and internal. Each cage has its own unique attributes to symbolize visually the nature of its oppression.

The institutional cage is the outermost. There are five bars, one for each type of institutional oppression: family, education, media, state and public policy, and the economy. These bars are constructed from aluminum foil and duct tape to create the feel of an industrial and rigid frame. On each of these bars are images representing oppressive systems based on race, gender, sexuality, and class. These images are the symbols that Burke talks about, and in this paper we analyze the affects of these images on their audience.

For the family bar, we have used the following images:

- KKK and child - this image signifies the passing on of values, including those regarding race, which can have either negative or positive connotations.
- Traditional gender roles - young children model their parents' behavior and look to them for appropriate behavior, and when children are presented with gender-specific tasks, they identify with the task as being relative to their gender.
- Birds and bees - the family defines the concept of sex for a child, and this image symbolizes the importance of this through "the talk" about sex, commonly referred to as "the birds and the bees." These talks are by standards heteronormative.
- Annie - the popular film/play Annie depicts the distinction in family life of the wealthy and the poor. She is shown both as a poor orphan and as the adoptee of the millionaire, "Daddy Warbucks." This aspect of upbringing defines reality for a child and affects their values significantly, particularly as to material objects though many values are learned.



For the education bar, we have used the following images:

- Segregated schools: the situation of segregation in schools creates an us V. them mentality, where the most-often white majority does not experience the culture of the minorities and does not learn the benefits of diversity. Often schools that are predominately a racial minority have worse education and lower economic status, so lower quality tools with which to conduct education.
- Home Ec.- gender-specific classes such as home ec and shop classes foster the concept of gender-appropriate roles.
- Heteronormative sex ed – In school we are given a basic education of sex, and it is always given under the auspices of an overarching heteronormative society. These discussions are often abstinence-only and feature images such as the one displayed, with “male” and “female” euphemisms. They ignore the concept of individual desire and gloss over the fact that there are alternate forms of sexual encounter, or “alternative lifestyles.”
- Memorization V. Critical thinking - big difference in education lies in the difference between poorer public schools and richer private institutions. The poorer class curriculum is based more off of rote memorization and does not involve critical thinking. It is essentially education on how to become a good member of the workforce. In the more affluent schools, there is a stronger emphasis on critical thinking tasks and management or problem-solving skills.

For the media bar, we have used the following images:

- Robert Downey in “black face” – this image speaks strongly of racial irreverence in American culture. The idea of painting a white man to look like a black man is wrong on a number of very foundational levels that we feel do not need further remark.



- Madonna and Britney kissing – it has become a fad for straight women to interact with each other in a sexual manner, i.e. kissing, etc., to “turn on” a watching male. This has led to the invalidation of the lesbian community, creating an image that it is simply for the pleasure of the man and encouraging the thought that lesbian women can be “changed” by a heterosexual experience.
- iPod with misogynist song: this image is a twofold representation of oppression, both class (by virtue of the iPod being a common status symbol) and gender. Women are frequently devalued in the pop music culture, whether they are booty popping in a music video or being verbally assaulted with negative language like “whore” and “bitch.”
- Paris Hilton – Paris Hilton represents the American obsession with the obscenely wealthy. It is an overarching theme in the media that there are only two classes: “Main Street,” or the middle class, and the wealthy. These images that we are inundated with negate the recognition that there is a class system in the American society, and encourages dehumanization in the portrayal of the poor.

For the state and public policy bar, we have used the following images:

- Hammed Karzai with a turban in a metal detector - racial profiling is encouraged by the actions authorities and subsequently affects the lay public. Knowing that Middle Easterners are profiled by the airline security forces makes it more acceptable.
- Mom in court with kid – gender preference is given to the mother in custody battles, which marginalizes the perception of the father’s capacity to fulfill his role in his child’s life.
- gay marriage – homosexual discrimination in legislation provides a support system for interpersonal oppression
- Crack versus cocaine – the rich get reduced jail time than the poor even if convicted of the exact same crime.



For the economy bar, we have used the following images:

- White hand with money – the white man still holds the majority of the money: think CEOs
- All-male photo of bank CEOs – women still have hurdles to overcome to be truly equal in employment; all-male portrayals of top executives imply that women simply cannot reach the higher echelons of employment.
- Gender appropriate clothing – what you wear matters to where you work, and it is unacceptable in many cases to wear clothing that is not “gender appropriate,” which does not leave room for acceptance of more than the binary concept of a male-female gender classification.
- Tuxedo – “professional attire” excludes those who have not had the luxury to purchase “nice” or many clothes from many occupations.

The interpersonal birdcage is composed of thick rope, representing a very organic type of oppression, as opposed to the industrial, rigid framework of the institutional cage. This cage is meant to show how the institutional discrimination against persons or types of persons foster negative attitudes between people. These negative attitudes are shown through everyday words and jokes that we don't always think of as oppressive. Statements like “That's so gay” box the term “gay” into a negative connotation. The culmination of these reinforced negative attitudes is ultimately violent reprisal against the target. No image connotes this more clearly than does a noose, the form of wanton violence amongst humans that has become so entrenched in history. Through this noose comes the head of the internal cage.

The internal cage is composed out of modeling clay for its malleability. A rat ball was sawed in half to create a hemisphere upon which we could build the androgynous figure of human diversity. The clay is swirling patchwork of all the racially-specific color terminologies:



black, brown, red, yellow, and white. All of these terms are slang and euphemisms for particular races. These are all of the slang terms for different races of human that we have all heard. They are swirled to represent that they are interchangeable and that every person, no matter their “color” is affected by these systems of oppression. The internal cage is also intended as a graphic and gruesome portrayal of what happens when our defenses collapse against the oppression we encounter from the institutional and interpersonal standpoint. We become afraid and self-loathing, which is why the figure is shown splayed, ripping itself apart, and vulnerable. A white “bar” is depicted as the backbone of the figure and used as a metaphor for the “backbone of oppression.” This bar enters the back of the figure’s skull and comes out of the figure’s mouth. Visually this represents the suppression of both the intellect and the voice of the marginalized individuals within a society.

So now we know about the structure and the types of oppression. What do we do with this knowledge? Why do we care? By knowing about these often unrecognized forms of oppression, we can know them when we see them, and understand the impact that they have on the community and on people. We can change ourselves and work to change others. We can make progress, removing one birdcage at a time.



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