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The Intersections of Oppression: A Visual Representation

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Introduction

It is difficult to imagine one's place within oppression, and even more difficult to picture one's participation in it. Yet the fact remains that we live in a hierarchical society that creates a steep slope for marginalized communities to climb. Marginalization occurs when an individual or group is considered "outside" the bounds of mainstream society based on differential association from the "norm", i.e. white, male, rich, and heterosexual.

The categories of marginalization include race, class, sexuality, and gender. These categories are used to assess vulnerable portions of society that are subject to oppression. The feminist scholar Marilyn Frye notes that

"The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press." *The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button.* Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between and among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce" (Frye 175).



This understanding of how the word oppression is defined aids in understanding how the concept of oppression applies to marginalized persons. To further understand this application, one must be aware of how “the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 307). Structural violence is “the experience of people who live in poverty or are marginalized by racism, gender inequality, or a noxious mix of all of the above” (Farmer 308). Structural violence must also be understood as being

“structured and *structuring*. It constricts the agency of its victims. It tightens a physical noose around their necks, and this garroting determines the way in which resources—food, medicine, even affection, are allocated and experienced” (Farmer 315).

Along the same line, Frye describes oppression as being an experience of “living...one’s life...confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional...but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (Frye 760). In this way oppression and structural violence can be viewed as parallel concepts that seek to describe the systemic ways that individual persons are restricted in a given society. Frye uses the visual evocation of a cage to further detail how oppression works:

“Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire anytime it wanted to go somewhere. [...] It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere” (Frye 176).



In other words, the metaphor of the birdcage calls attention to the fact that many people cannot conceptualize oppression because a microscopic view is taken; not a macroscopic view that enables understanding of how structural violence abets oppression. A macroscopic view involves understanding the categories of oppression from a historical perspective, as well as looking at the intersections of these categories to see how they relate to the individual. In conclusion, the experience of oppression is real, and it exists in the form of structural violence.

The Intersections Of Oppression: A Visual Representation

Taking Frye's metaphor of a birdcage as the means of conveying the systemic nature of oppression, I created a birdcage out of eight collage panels which depicted images of the categories of oppression race, sex, gender, sexuality, and class. As this birdcage was to be presented to the community, I decided to focus on local events to highlight the fact that oppression does not "out there, somewhere in the United States," but rather right here, in Florida.

To do this, two of the panels illustrated South Florida residents Hope Witsell and Ryan Skipper. Hope Witsell was just thirteen years old when she committed suicide by hanging. She committed suicide because she was a victim of bullying, being called a "slut" and "whore," among other things, because she had sent a picture of her breasts to her boyfriend via text. The picture got out, and the middle school and neighboring high school all participated in the bullying. This bullying falls under the category of sexism and sexuality. Sexism was involved because Hope was a girl, and was victimized because she was a girl due to the double standard surrounding relationships in American society. Sexuality is involved because she was a young girl trying to express her sexuality amidst a wider culture that promotes pornography and the sexual objectification of young women. Sexuality is also involved because her decision to send pornographic images of herself to her boyfriend is grounded in the wider cultural myth that



pornography and other sexually symbolic acts are the means by which to “keep a boyfriend.” All of these categories resulted in the violent oppression and stigmatization of a young girl that resulted in her death. Although the death was a suicide, the violent reaction to her individual decision was what swayed the hand that killed her – her own. Because this event happened in a country south of St. Petersburg, Florida, where the community presentation was being presented, Hope Witsell was a heart-wrenching example of how oppression can result in violence in a localized event.

Next to the image of Hope Witsell hanging, was an image contracted from the Internet of two black men who were lynched - their hanging, mutilated bodies surrounded by a crowd of white people. This image, when put next to the image of Hope, served the purpose of illustrating how the physical violence of lynching inflicted on those two black men by the wider (whiter) community of the past is similar to the symbolic violence of suicide inflicted on Hope by the wider community today. Another South Florida incident that occurred in Polk County, Florida (neighbor to Pinellas Country, where St. Petersburg is located) regards the brutal murder of Ryan Skipper.

Ryan Skipper was in his early twenties when he was stabbed to death over twenty times. Two men decided to steal a car, and they targeted Ryan because he was homosexual. The brutality of his murder depicts an anti-gay violence, not just violence related to property theft. Sexuality is the category this violence falls under. Florida, in general, has many structural laws that restrict the homosexual experience of marriage and family. Therefore this anti-gay violent event stems from a wider verification of anti-gay sentiment found in the governing body and the voting population of Florida residents. Gender also plays a role in this violence because homosexuality is popularly understood by the mainstream community as being effeminate – a feminine attribute. In this way violence against homosexuality can also be understood as an offshoot of violence against that which is feminine, or womanly.



The primary goal of this project was to illustrate how structural violence services oppression and how those categories that are used to validate violence and oppression result in physical and symbolic violence. A secondary goal was to illustrate how communities can also come together in solidarity to fight for those people who are marginalized. This goal stems from the understanding that we are all marginalized, and we all benefit from the marginalization of people to some degree. An example of how the wider community benefits can be seen by the formation of the Coalition of Immokalee Farmworkers (CIW). This South Florida group of farmworkers formed at the grassroots level to combat injustice, exploitation, and human slavery that their community was subject to. Class and race play heavily into this coalition because the farmworkers are poor and usually from a race other than Caucasian. Because of this, they are marginalized and exploited. There is a law that decrees that farmworkers and domestic servants cannot form unions. This law is rooted in racism, and dates back to the American days of slavery. To illustrate the fact that farmworkers experience slave conditions I took a painting of slaves doing labor – picking cotton and then the bales of cotton being lifted upon their backs, next to a picture taken from the CIW album that depicts farmworkers picking tomatoes and then the buckets of tomatoes, weighing 32 lbs, being lifted upon their backs. The images were strikingly similar, and so these images were placed next to each other with a caption taken from a magazine that reads “the greediest generation.”

The fact is that human slavery still exists, and by thinking about slavery in terms of black-only or as something that *used* to occur, there is little popular recognition of the persistence of human slavery today. Florida, in particular, is one of the top three states in the nation that participates in human trafficking. The wider community benefits from these transactions of human flesh and labor by paying a few cents less for tomatoes, or clothing, or other goods. Because of the often economic ends to these kinds of benefits to the wider community, I was sure



to include a quote from the feminist writer Sylvia Plath, reach reads, "And money the sperm fluid of it all." This quote is significant because it is implicit of patriarchy and the causation and fruition of money surrounding marginalized communities and oppression.

Quotes such as that, and other images of race, sexuality, sex, class, and gender, were all meshed together to illustrate the myriad of ways that these categories can intersect. I chose the creative venue of collage for specific reasons. One is that a collage utilized images readily accessible to the public. These images and words are therefore part of the current trend of symbols that perpetuate racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativism. Only by putting these images into the context of oppression and structural violence is the viewer made aware of the symbolic meaning of these images. This relates to Frye's aforementioned message which was to look at systemic oppression macroscopically rather than microscopically.

The images I used of black women, of homosexuals, of sexism, of AIDS, may not appear to be oppressive. Yet when put together, as in a collage, the emerging picture is one of racism, sexism, classism, and other categories of oppression as well as the intersections of oppression (e.g. a black woman). For the viewer, the collage birdcage offered a variety of images and words that they can personally identify with. This is an effort towards making the audience aware of their own experience(s) as an oppressed person. Perhaps it was also enable them to identify some categories that they act as oppressors, too. To give them the incentive to do this kind of analytical thinking, I provided on one of the panels a mirror with the inscription above: "what is your 'ism?'" That question is twofold, because it challenges the viewer to ask themselves what "ism" they can be classified under, and also what "isms" they themselves classify others.



Conclusion

In conclusion, the images used for the collage were all used in an effort to explore the categories and intersections of gender, race, sexuality, sex, and class. In doing so, these images were purposive of evoking a response in the audience to create change. Lloyd F. Bitzer defines rhetoric as “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (Bitzer 4). The visual discourse that occurred between the audience and the collage depicted the American world in which “rhetorical exigencies abound; the world [that] really invites change - change conceived and effected by human agents who quite properly address a mediating audience” (Bitzer 13).

Dr. Paul Farmer makes the argument that

“structural violence now comes with symbolic props far more powerful-indeed, far more convincing-than anything we might serve up to counter them; examples include the discounting of any divergent voice as “unrealistic” or “utopian,”” (Farmer 317).

This is a significant concept because the following argument I am about to make involves an idealistic, and therefore “unrealistic” or “utopian.” I am saying that, in solidarity with these communities that are alternative to the mainstream ideologies, in solidarity with the divergent voices from mainstream society, and by using these injustices of oppression suffered by the marginalization of all people within a hierarchical culture as a catalyst for change, change must and will be effected. It is being affected by the CIW, by community organizations such as Metro Charities, an organization that caters to the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) community. And because these organizations are made up of people, because society is made up of people, and because people can serve as mediators of change, then change (for the better) will necessarily follow. Hoping and acting upon



that hope for change is exactly the picture of what the struggle against structural violence and oppression looks like.