

Cycle of Oppression

Taken from a handout developed by Sheri Schmidt in 1994.

One way to explain how oppression is perpetuated in our society is by defining the following terms and showing the link between them, the momentum that keeps the cycle going.

1. Stereotype

A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. While often negative, stereotypes may also be complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact however, simply because they are broad generalizations. The stereotypes we hold form the basis of our prejudices.

2. Prejudice

A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members. When the person holding the prejudice also has and uses the power to deny opportunities, resources or access to a person because of their group membership, there is discrimination.

3. Discrimination

Prejudice plus the power. Discrimination can take many forms, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, etc. Many acts of discrimination build up over time, perpetuated against one relatively less powerful social group by a more powerful social group, lead to a group of people being in a state of oppression.

4. Oppression

The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group of people with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices. Because oppression is institutionalized in our society, target group members often believe the messages and internalize the oppression.

5. Internalized Oppression

The "buying into" the elements of oppression by the target group. When target group members believe the stereotypes they are taught about themselves, they tend to act them out and thus perpetuate the stereotypes which reinforces the prejudice and keeps the cycle going.