2012 Isms Conference Resources on Internalized Oppression and Privilege

Definitions

Urban Dictionary:

- **Internalized Oppression**: the process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate myths and stereotypes applied to the group.

Wikipedia:

- **Oppression** is the act of using power to empower and/or privilege a group at the expense of disempowering, marginalizing, silencing, and subordinating another. Oppression does not need established organizational support; it can be rendered on a much smaller individual scale. It is particularly closely associated with nationalism and derived social systems, wherein identity is built by antagonism to the other. The term itself derives from the idea of being "weighted down."
- **Internalized oppression**: In sociology and psychology, internalized oppression is the manner in which an oppressed group comes to use against itself the methods of the oppressor. For example, sometimes members of marginalized groups hold an oppressive view toward their own group, or start to believe in negative stereotypes of themselves. For example, internalized racism is when members of Group A believe that the stereotypes of Group A are true and may believe that they are less intelligent or academically inferior to other groups of people. Any social group can internalize prejudice.

Examples, reflections and experiences from individuals and advocacy groups about internalized oppression

http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/10/beyond_victimiz.php

Beyond Victimization

By Dan Kwong

Artists, their organizations and their community coalitions are truly on the front lines in the battle for American culture. Attacks on freedom of artistic expression continue, fostering not only cuts in funding but internal struggles and self-censorship. In addition, the mandate to undo racism and other forms of oppression creates a constant struggle for clarity and compassion among people of different backgrounds.

We all have great despair about this immeasurable gulf of ignorance, fear and anger that seems to divide humanity along so many lines, pitting us against each other. It is heartbreaking, it is infuriating, it is terrifying. And in the face of such overwhelming irrationality
it is not surprising that we sometimes allow this despair to become our guiding force, adopting a reactive, victim stance. While this is completely understandable, I believe it is a mistake.

We need to be heard and acknowledged for what we have been through in dealing with oppression: how we have survived, and how we are still battling for our lives, our work and our communities. But there are ways this battle can also trap us and limit us, ultimately reinforcing our own internalized oppression. I believe we must hold out for a concept of identity that goes beyond victimization that is not defined solely by oppression.

Every liberation movement, social transformation project or progressive change effort, regardless of its identity or cause, inevitably runs head-on into that most confusing, insidious and destructive obstacle—internalized oppression. And while we fight against its various forms, it is internalized oppression that actually does the most long-term damage to people.

Anyone who has been hurt by oppressive treatment will eventually internalize it, with a variety of resulting reactions. Internalized oppression is an umbrella term for our response to all the identity-specific ways we have been hurt and still carry the effects of that hurt: internalized sexism, internalized racism, internalized Gay oppression, internalized anti-Semitism, internalized classism, etc. We can live our whole lives in rigid response to our oppression, operating by knee-jerk reaction rather than by thoughtful, intelligent, compassionate process.

One oppression that virtually every human encounters regardless of class, gender, race or ethnicity, is the oppression of children. It is our first experience of systematic invalidation, disempowerment and mistreatment. If we had not first been subjected to such treatment as young people and internalized it, we never would have tolerated the ensuing sexism, racism or classism heaped upon us. We would have had no doubts about our intelligence, self-worth, power, beauty, creativity, connection and honest pride as human beings. It is the primer coat of internalized oppression that makes us vulnerable to all the other layers of oppression we face later on.

It is extremely difficult to engage our most exquisitely complex and elegant thinking processes when we are being attacked, disrespected, hated, ridiculed, threatened or excluded. Sometimes we have survived by defiance, by digging in our heels and attacking back, adopting the oppressor’s techniques and strategies, and going full tilt in the opposite direction. The phenomenon of “pecking order” is classic internalized oppression—a victimized person seeking out someone else upon whom to repeat the mistreatment.

Other examples of internalized oppression include self-hate, in which we become simultaneous victimizer and victim. We survive by becoming invisible, silent, compliant, by isolating ourselves, by “agreeing” with our oppression or by identifying with the oppressor group and denying our own identity. In the grips of internalized oppression, it will appear as if we have but two choices: victimize someone else, or be a victim. There is no judgment on anyone for having internalized oppression—it is virtually inescapable.
Learning to recognize our internalized oppression and see that our humanity is separate and distinct from it is a huge step toward building alliances between individuals and groups. To see it for what it is—a collection of painful responses—means we are less likely to get confused about each other and about ourselves.

The core of internalized oppression is the emotional pain from our experiences of being oppressed. Wrapped around that pain is a layer of isolation that keeps it all glued together. And this is where we each must look to begin unraveling our internalized oppression. One way to identify it is to look at all the ways we mistreat ourselves, all the ways we mistreat others, and all the ways we allow ourselves to be mistreated.

When we treat each other as if we are enemies we are buying into our internalized oppression, allowing the oppression to define us and accepting the victim role as if it were our inherent nature. It is not other humans who are the enemy. It is the oppression we have all been slimed with. Yes it does affect us deeply, but we are far more than the sum of our mistreatments. Eliminating internalized oppression is key to clarity and effectiveness in making social transformation possible.

Dan Kwong is a Los Angeles-based performance artist, writer, teacher and community activist who tours internationally with his solo multimedia performances. This story was first published in High Performance #72, Summer 1996.

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From Women's Rural Advocacy Programs (a Native American group working to prevent violence against women) http://www.letswrap.com/nadvinfo/examples.htm

**Internalized Oppression**

External oppression is the unjust exercise of authority and power by one group over another. It includes imposing one group's belief system, values and life ways over another group.

External oppression becomes internalized oppression when we come to believe and act as if the oppressor's beliefs system, values, and life way is reality.

"Self-hate" and "internalized racism" are other ways of saying internalized oppression.

The result of internalized oppression is shame and the disowning of our individual and cultural reality. Without internalized oppression, we would not now have previously unseen levels of violence, especially against women and children.

Drunkenness, disrespect for God, fighting, cussing and disrespect for women were "foreign" behaviors modeled by the Cavalry, and eventually worked their way into our communities through internalized oppression.

Internalized oppression means the oppressor doesn't have to exert any more pressure, because we now do it to ourselves and each other. Divide and conquer works.
**Examples of Internalized Oppression**

"If she'd just stay home/clean the house/be quiet, he wouldn't hit her."

"Women need to know their place. Men have to tune 'em once in a while to remind them."

"She was yelling at him/flirting with some guy/didn't clean the house. What did she expect?"

She's an adult; she makes her own choices...we have to do something for the kids."

"Children need a father. Fathers have rights, too. He hit her, not the kids, right?"

"Nobody wants to be with a mouthy woman."

"She needs to stand up for herself/quit being a victim/be a better mother."

"Men are threatened by all this women's lib stuff."

"Men are naturally jealous and aggressive."

"It's just another domestic/family fight."

"Traditional Indian women are subservient and quiet."

"Geez, she's asking for help again./She just wants to vacation at the shelter./Just manipulates the system."

"If she won't help herself, why should we?"

**Excerpts from Maria Root's (clinical psychologist and U. Washington professor) experiences**


**You Don't Fit Neatly Into a Box**

In any event, there is no getting around the fact that the number of multiracial people is growing.

For instance, a recent survey of the [Seattle Public Schools](http://www.seattleschools.org) revealed that 20 percent of its students identified themselves as coming from multiracial families--yet there is no checkoff for multiracial children. In 1992, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that for the first time in history, the number of biracial babies is increasing at a faster rate than the number of single-race babies. The number of black/white biracial babies grew nearly 500
percent. Huge increases were also recorded in biracial births of babies to Japanese and white parents, and to Native American and non-Native American parents.

A 1967 Supreme Court decision overturning the remaining state laws against interracial marriage was a symbol of changes in cultural standards. Mildred Jeter, a black/Native American woman, married Perry Loving, a white man, in Virginia in 1958. They were sentenced to one year in prison in 1959 for their interracial marriage.

Over the past 25 years, attitudes towards interracial marriage have changed dramatically. Millions of interracial marriages were noted by the census bureau in 1990. A 1989 Seventeen magazine survey found that 40 percent of the young (and primarily white) women asked indicated that they would date interracially.

Acceptance seems to be creeping in. But that doesn't mean life is easy for children of mixed parents.

"Growing up in a family where your parents are from two cultures is difficult," Root explains from personal experience. "You don't feel like you fit in." She recalls as a teenager, wanting to shave her legs. But her Filipina mother told her she couldn't because in her native land, only prostitutes shaved their legs. "So I had hairy legs in a place where that wasn't very acceptable," Root says.

She recounts being made fun of by other classmates, being showered with the same racial epithets as members of other races ("I was called a nigger, as were other minorities," she recalls) of having dates broken because boys' parents couldn't accept her. Ironically, her father experienced an even worse fate when he decided to marry outside of his race (he is of German, Irish and Scottish descent). He was "cut off" by his father for marrying a non-white person. To this day, Root has never met her grandfather.

"Hatred and bad feelings come out in the most insidious ways," she says. "They don't have to be blatant, such as what happened to my father. It could be the questions you get asked, the way you are looked at. As a multiracial person, you have to battle not to internalize stereotypes. My mother worked very hard to teach me to protect myself as a mixed color kid. She never felt embarrassed by how she looked or who we were. And she fought to instill that sense of pride in us."

Root has taken that lesson a step further, creating a "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People." "It puts down on paper what people have been talking about when it comes to race issues," she says. "It is a tool for discussion."

Her bill of rights is posted on the Internet, put up on the walls of other organizations, and has been circulated among other groups, such as the International Interracial Association.

"Multiracial people blur the boundaries between the races and don't fit neatly into a box," she says. "Questions such as 'What are you?' or 'How did your parents meet?' or 'Are your parents married?' indicate stereotypes that other people use to make meaning out of a multiracial person's life."
"When we refuse to fragment ourselves or others, then we become capable of embracing the humanity in ourselves and in others. We become less fearful, less judgmental and less subject to defining ourselves by others' opinions of us."

http://academic.udayton.edu/Race/01race/latinos01.htm

Laura M. Padilla


Internalized racism has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and "agree" to our own oppression.

In order to understand the many ways in which internalized oppression and racism affect subordinated communities, it is important to have a general background on these forces. Thus, this part of the article will describe internalized oppression and racism generally and will then describe how internalized oppression and racism are particularly manifested in the Latino community. This will better allow the reader to comprehend why Latinos engage in the specific types of self-destructive behavior described throughout this article.

A. Working Definitions of Internalized Oppression and Racism

When a victim experiences a hurt that is not healed, distress patterns emerge whereby the victim engages in some type of harmful behavior. Internalized oppression has been described as the process by which these patterns reveal themselves.

These distress patterns, created by oppression and racism from the outside, have been played out in the only two places it has seemed "safe" to do so. First, upon members of our own group--particularly upon those over whom we have some degree of power or control . . . . Second, upon ourselves through all manner of self-invalidation, self-doubt, isolation, fear, feelings of powerlessness and despair . . . .

Thus, internalized oppression commences externally. In other words, dominant players start the chain of oppression through racist and discriminatory behavior. This behavior could range from physical violence prompted by the victim's race, to race-based exclusion, to derogatory race-based name-calling and stereotyping (such as "we don't need any more wetbacks--they just take away our jobs"), together with capitalization on the fears created by those stereotypes.

Those at the receiving end of prejudice can experience physical and psychological harm, and over time, they internalize and act on negative perceptions about themselves and other members of their own group. How might internalized oppression appear generally--that is, not in regards to a particular ethnic or racial group?

Patterns of internalized racism cause us adults to find fault, criticize, and invalidate each other. This invariably happens when we come together in a group to address some important problem or undertake some liberation project. What follows is divisiveness and disunity leading to despair and abandonment of the effort.
Patterns of internalized oppression cause us to attack, criticize or have unrealistic expectations of any one of us who has the courage to step forward and take on leadership responsibilities. This leads to a lack of support that is absolutely necessary for effective leadership to emerge and group strength to grow. It also leads directly to the "burn out" phenomenon we have all witnessed in, or experienced as, effective . . . leaders.

Internalized racism affects our behavior in many other ways, yet always with the result that we harm ourselves and sometimes others. The following section will describe how internalized racism manifests itself specifically within the Latino community.

B. Internalized Racism and Latinos

Internalized oppression operates rather uniformly at both the group and individual levels, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, through some common behavioral patterns. However, it also manifests itself uniquely depending on the negative stereotypes it causes a particular group to internalize. Latinos' specific history gives rise to the particularities of our internalized oppression and racism. We "share a unique experience of oppression and survival in the United States. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, who constitute the largest and oldest Latino/a communities within the official borders of the United States, were attacked, invaded, colonized, annexed, and exploited by the United States." This oppressive behavior toward Latinos is deep-rooted. Jeanne Guana elaborates:

After the Mexican American War ended in 1848, people of Mexican origin faced lynchings, land theft and virulent racism. Later, in times of economic depression, people of Mexican origin--citizens and non-citizens alike--were deported en masse . . . . As a result, many Mexican-origin people internalized the racism and learned to despise all things Mexican.

Despising all things native to ourselves causes unhealthy behavior, including self-loathing and participation in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Latinos may be conditioned to believe that other Latinos--particularly recent immigrants--are taking jobs away from United States citizens or are unfairly taking advantage of United States social services. Additionally, we may refrain from using Spanish in professional settings because it will betray our heritage, or we may believe that Whiter is better. "From the Latina/o viewpoint, the desirability of whiteness represents the internalization by the colonized of the colonizers' predilections." The remainder of this section will provide greater detail on ways that internalized racism affects the Latino community, both at the group and individual levels.

At the group level, internalized oppression and racism involve harmful or destructive conduct by members of a group directed at other members of the same group. 
"[Internalized racism] has been a major ingredient in the distressful and unworkable relationships which we so often have with each other. It has proved to be the fatal stumbling block of every promising and potentially powerful . . . liberation effort that has failed in the past." Internalized racism thus thwarts Latinos' empowerment efforts. For example, Latino groups often wither when leadership issues revolve around how "ethnic" one is. To wit, at California Western School of Law, one year a majority of the La Raza law students refused to elect a blond student to a board position because she was not
perceived to be "Mexican" enough, even though she was born in Mexico, spoke better Spanish than most of her classmates, and was a committed activist. The experience was devastating. Internalized oppression and politics of race impeded her advancement and prevented her from performing work that would have benefited the Latino community. I have seen the same politics of race emerge among La Raza Lawyers of San Diego--members' credibility was frequently based on whether they were perceived as either "too dark" or "too light," depending on the issue.

Group-level internalized racism also reveals itself through the way Latinos view other Latinos. For instance, many people in the Latino community believe the tired propaganda that Latino immigrants are a drain on social services. As far back as 1913, "the Commissioner of Immigration . . . publicly announced his fear that Mexicans might become public charges, since according to these authorities, Mexicans came to the United States only to receive public relief." Today, many Americans harbor that same belief about recent immigrants, and too many Latinos believe it. If those who believe this propaganda were to look beyond the myths to the facts, they would learn that many immigrants contribute more to our society than they receive. One expert "estimates that immigration brings economic benefits to the United States in the range of $6 to $20 billion annually--small, but still a net positive gain." Moreover, "there is overwhelming evidence that undocumented immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in public benefits." When researching campaigns to limit immigration, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic found that even conservative think tanks concluded that "immigration is a net benefit, not a drawback to the *69 regions in which immigrants settle." Their research uncovered conservative spokespersons who emphasized that "legal immigrants are more likely than natives to participate in the labor force. . .and that immigrants earn roughly $700 more a year per capita than natives, with those who entered the United States before 1980 earning nearly $4,000 more." Moreover, many immigrants, particularly Latinos, exhibit entrepreneurial spirit, often starting their own businesses. "According to the Greenlining Institute in San Francisco, most of the new small business development in California that helped to move the state's economy forward was fueled by Latino entrepreneurs." Thus, rather than taking more than their share of public benefits, in many cases Latinos disproportionately contribute to the economic health of the United States.

For more—go to website.

http://www.rc.org/publications/journals/black_reemergence/br2/br2_5_sl.html

INTERNALIZED RACISM :A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH HAS BEEN ACHIEVED

Dr. Suzanne Lipsky

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The International Re-evaluation Counseling Communities.

Internalized racism has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and "agree" to our own oppression. It has been a major factor preventing us, as black people, from realizing and putting into action the tremendous intelligence and
power which in reality we possess. On a personal level it has been a major ingredient in
the distressful and unworkable relationships which we so often have with each other. It
has proved to be the fatal stumbling block of every promising and potentially powerful
black liberation effort that has failed in the past. Patterns of internalized oppression
severely limit the effectiveness of every existing black group.

This has been a problem that no one has been able to solve and over which many have
despaired. Some patterns of internalized racism have become so familiar that we,
ourselves, accept them as part of our "black culture." We attribute them to "the way we
are."

WHAT IS INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION?

We know that every hurt or mistreatment, if not discharged (healed), will create a
distress pattern (some form of rigid, destructive, or ineffective feeling and behavior) in
the victim of this mistreatment. This distress pattern, when re-stimulated, will tend to
push the victim through a re-enactment of the original distress experience either with
someone else in the victim role or, when this is not possible, with the original victim
being the object of her/his distress pattern.

Racism is a form of oppression that has been systematically initiated, encouraged, and
powerfully enforced by the distress patterns of individual members of the majority culture
and their institutions. Black people have been the victims, the primary victims in the
country, of every form of abuse, invalidation, oppression, and exploitation.

This mistreatment has installed heavy chronic distress patterns upon us as a people and
as individuals. We are in no way to blame for the initiation and installation of these
patterns. It is clear that historically we have been denied the conditions necessary (for
example, the safety) to discharge this distress. It is also evident that from the days of
slavery to the present, we have not been in any position to re-enact these patterns upon
our oppressors.

The result has been that these distress patterns, created by oppression and racism from
the outside, have been played out in the only two places it has seemed "safe" to do so.
First, upon members of our own group - particularly upon those over whom we have
some degree of power or control, our children. Second, upon ourselves through all
manner of self-invalidation, self-doubt, isolation, fear, feelings of powerlessness, and
despair.

It is important to keep in mind that some of the patterned behaviors that we frequently
recognize within black cultures were originally developed to keep us alive. They
originally had a definite survival value. They are a testimony to the strength,
inventiveness, and determination of our people - our refusal to give up as a people. Even
"today" chronic patterns can have "get-us-by" survival value. Today, many of these
responses to mistreatment have become embedded in our culture, but they no longer
serve a useful function. Instead, these so-called "elements of black culture" operate to
lock us into our roles as victims of oppression.

Internalized oppression is this turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our
own people the distress patterns that result from the racism and oppression of the
majority society. As part of our liberation work, we know that we must seek out and
direct the attention of ourselves and the world to the strength, intelligence, greatness,
power, and success of our people and our culture. We must also constantly seek and
root out those features of our present cultures that have been imposed by responses to
racism and that keep us trapped in that oppression today.

**HOW DOES INTERNALIZED RACISM AFFECT US? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?**

Patterns of internalized racism get played out in dozens of unique ways in each
individual. But we have come to recognize that there are certain forms of internalized
oppression that are widely experienced by black people in our society. Some forms of
these distress patterns are so universal throughout our black sub-culture that they are
mistaken for a "true" part of our culture.

These destructive and hurtful behaviors and feelings are not part of our real culture.
They are not part of the nature of black people. They are simply chronic patterns (the
kind that play all the time and are mistaken for reality) resulting from systematic and
institutionalized mistreatment.

Understanding this gives us the safety to undertake the job of identifying all forms of
internalized oppression in ourselves and other oppressed peoples. We recognize these
as our enemy, as chronic patterns that prevent our liberation. We subject each example
we find to discharge and re-evaluation.

*For more, go to website.*

[http://www.rc.org/publications/journals/black_reemergence/br2/br2_5_sl.html](http://www.rc.org/publications/journals/black_reemergence/br2/br2_5_sl.html)