

# CHAPTER 1

## Oppression 101: An Overview

Black Lives Matter. It is a movement that has gained widespread recognition for fighting against the oppression of Black Peoples. Through television, radio, newspapers, magazines, social media, and perhaps by just walking or driving around in any city, it is very likely that most of us have already been exposed to #BlackLivesMatter in some form. Therefore, we have already been witness to one of the more powerful, remarkable, and recognizable movements against oppression in the history of the United States.

As many of us may already know, the Black Lives Matter movement is just one of many organizations that have fought against the oppression of Black Peoples. For instance, there's the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded by a group led by W. E. B. DuBois in 1909, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957, and the Organization of Afro-American Unity founded by Malcolm X in 1964. There is also the Underground Railroad, a network of individuals—including Harriet Tubman—who helped Black Peoples escape slavery in the 1800s. We can even go all the way back to the 1600s and find records of people and organizations who were calling for the abolition of African slavery. The fact that groups have been fighting against the oppression of Black individuals ever since the beginning of the United States makes it clear that the oppression of Black Peoples has been going on throughout American history (Bailey, Williams, & Favors, 2014).

Similarly, oppression in its many forms has also been going on throughout human history worldwide. We see examples of oppression from biblical stories (e.g., the enslavement of Israelites) to colonization of indigenous peoples (e.g., Gonzalez, Simard, Baker-Demaray, & Iron Eyes, 2014; Lewis, Allen, & Fleagle, 2014; Salzman & Laenui, 2014) and the subjugation of women (e.g., Bearman & Amrhein, 2014), all the way

to the denial of equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals (e.g., Nadal & Mendoza, 2014) and the marginalization of people with disabilities (e.g., Watermeyer & Gorgens, 2014). Oppression has been so omnipresent and widespread in our world (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3) that it is very likely that all of us have witnessed oppression, experienced oppression, inflicted oppression, felt the negative consequences of oppression, or all of the above.

Despite its pervasiveness and harmful impacts, however, it seems as though many of us still do not have a clear understanding of oppression, its many manifestations, and its consequences. Many of us may have heard of racism, sexism, and even heterosexism or homophobia (more specific forms of oppression are discussed in Chapter 2), but do not see the need to address them—believing that such “isms” are not legitimate concerns and are just products of some people’s ideological movement toward “political correctness”—thereby failing to understand that “isms” are oppressive and are therefore harmful. Even among those of us who are familiar with specific “isms” and agree that they are social ills that need to be addressed, many seem to not see that the core commonality between these various forms of “isms” is that they are problematic precisely because they are oppressive. This seems to be the case for the field of psychology, as a simple search on PsycINFO—the largest database of psychology-related scholarly literature—using “racism,” “sexism,” and “heterosexism or homophobia” as keywords produced 6,647, 2,137, and 1,709 hits, respectively (as of July 14, 2016). On the other hand, the keyword “oppression” produced only 1,822 hits, seemingly failing to recognize that racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other “isms” fall under the broader concept of oppression. Indeed, oppression in all of its forms, complexities, and effects seems to remain an especially vague, unclear, and misunderstood concept to many of us.

So to begin the book, this opening chapter provides a brief overview of oppression, its many forms and manifestations, and why we need to pay attention to it, while also outlining the coverage of such topics in the other chapters.

## ■ WHAT IS OPPRESSION? A STATE AND A PROCESS

For those of us with a background in psychology, we might remember from our introductory course that a basic definition of psychology is something like *the scientific study of people’s thoughts, emotions, and*

*behaviors*. Therefore, the field of psychology is interested in all the factors—whether they be physiological or biological, social, cultural, environmental, perhaps even spiritual—that may influence how people think, feel, and act. The multitude and complexity of factors that influence our psychological experiences may lead our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to become distorted, inaccurate, and biased. In psychology, we refer to these distorted thoughts and beliefs that may lead to unfair behaviors as *stereotypes*, *prejudice*, and *discrimination* (discussed in more detail later). Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are concepts that have been studied extensively; for instance, a search on the PsycINFO database on these keywords resulted in 2,768, 6,962, and 5,267 hits, respectively—even way more than the large psychological literature on specific “isms”! In other words, the field of psychology has done plenty of work on how people’s thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors may become biased! One of the many things we have learned about these concepts is that all of us have these erroneous beliefs and biases about our fellow human beings. In turn, these inaccurate perceptions and unfair treatments of certain groups of people may lead to the creation of a society that generally favors or benefits some people while systematically degrading and subjugating others. This unfair process of aiding some people while harming others and the resulting condition of inequality between people is **oppression**.

A dictionary definition of oppression is “Unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power especially by the imposition of burdens; the condition of being weighed down; an act of pressing down; a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind” (*Merriam-Webster Third International Edition*). As we can see, this definition suggests that in addition to oppression being a condition in which there is inequality between groups, oppression is also a process that enacts or maintains the state of oppression.

Similarly, the abundant definitions for oppression in the scholarly literature (e.g., Barker, 2003; Collins, 1993; Davis, 2002; Deutsch, 2006; Freire, 1970; Frye, 1983; Gil, 1994; Johnson, 2000a, 2000b; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996; Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984; Young, 1990) all center on the notion that groups of people have unequal power (**oppression as a condition or state**) and the more dominant or privileged groups use their power to exert violence on, exploit, marginalize, and inferiorize the dominated groups (**oppression as a process or act**). For example,

psychologists Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) conceptualize oppression as follows:

. . . oppression entails a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves. . . . Oppression, then, is a series of asymmetric power relations between individuals, genders, classes, communities, nations, and states. (pp. 129–130)

Consistent with these definitions, we offer the following:

Oppression occurs when one group has more access to power and privilege than another group, and when that power and privilege is used to maintain the status quo (i.e., domination of one group over another). Thus, oppression is both a state and a process, with the state of oppression being an unequal group access to power and privilege, and the process of oppression being the ways in which inequality between groups is maintained. (David & Derthick, 2014, p. 3)

The process, exercise, or enactment of oppression can take the form of imposition and deprivation. According to Hanna, Talley, and Guindon (2000), **oppression by imposition or force** is “the act of imposing on . . . others . . . a label, role experience, or set of living conditions that is unwanted, needlessly painful, and detracts from physical or psychological well-being . . . (such as) demeaning hard labor, degrading job roles, ridicule, and negative media images and messages that foster and maintain distorted beliefs” (p. 431). In the case of colonialism, for example, colonizers hold power and privilege over the colonized or indigenous peoples in that colonizers are more likely to be in positions of power because the colonizers’ characteristics (e.g., the language they speak, the type of knowledge they hold, the type of expertise they have, their mannerisms, the way they dress) are more generally accepted and valued (e.g., the colonizers’ characteristics are seen by many people as the standard or the definition of a “qualified” leader, so people are more likely to vote for people with such characteristics). In turn, these positions of power are often used to impose a certain belief about acceptable definitions of “important

knowledge,” degrading indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and expertise while propagating a distorted and dehumanizing public perception of indigenous culture (e.g., as backward, uncivilized, or “old fashioned” and no longer relevant) that operates to keep indigenous peoples subjugated.

Even further, oppression can also be enacted by deprivation. According to Sue (2010), **oppression by deprivation** “involves depriving people of desired jobs, an education, healthcare, or living conditions necessary for physical and mental well-being . . . [such as] food, clothing, shelter, love, respect, social support, or self-dignity” (p. 7). An example of this is when colonizers deprive indigenous peoples of the right to govern themselves or when colonizers limit the power of indigenous peoples’ tribal government, basically treating indigenous peoples as deserving less than what colonizers are allowed to do. Therefore, the process of oppression—enacted through imposition and deprivation—essentially operates to preserve the status quo which is a state of oppression.

### ■ ALWAYS REMEMBER: “OPPRESSION” HAS TWO PS

In addition to understanding that oppression is both a state and a process and that the process of oppression can be done through imposition and deprivation, it is also very important to clarify two key and necessary components of oppression—*Power* and *Privilege*. By its very definition oppression does not exist if there is no power and privilege inequalities between people. **Power** may be defined as people’s access to resources that enhance their chances of getting what they need in order to lead safe, productive, fulfilling lives. It is the capacity to exert force, influence, or control over one’s environment—which includes other people, organizations, and institutions—in order to get what one wants. Power also includes the system of individuals, institutions, and cultural norms, standards, and assumptions that support, justify, legitimize, and protect certain worldviews and ways of doing. The ideal, of course, is for all people and groups to have equal power; however, this is not the reality. Some groups of people—like Americans—have more capacity to control or influence their environment to get the resources they want than other groups of people—like people in Somalia, for example. Indeed, Americans have more power, clout, and influence than almost everyone else in the world as the United States is widely regarded as a “world leader,” its military being considered as the “most

powerful in the world,” and its president being often regarded as “the leader of the free world.”

The existing inequality of power between groups gives some people privileges that others do not have. For instance, just by being an American and possessing an American passport give one the privilege to travel pretty much anywhere in the world with relative ease, whereas Somali people (and people in many other countries) will need to go through a long and arduous process of obtaining approvals before being allowed to enter the United States (and other Western countries). **Privilege**, therefore, is unearned power that is only easily or readily available to some people simply as a result of their social group membership. It is a privilege for many European or White Americans, for example, to have their ancestors’ histories (e.g., courses on “European History,” “Western Civilization”), cultures (e.g., Greek mythology, Shakespearean literature), and worldviews (e.g., individualism, capitalism) validated as the standard, the norm, or as important and required knowledge on which social acceptance and admiration, educational achievement, economic opportunities, and social mobility are based. In other words, knowing and understanding such material (e.g., Western history, literature) and thinking a certain way (e.g., quickly, competitively) are parts of the dominant society’s definition of “intelligent,” “acceptable,” or even “desirable,” and what institutions consequently consider as the standard to which other people are measured (or tested) and forced to live up to. Privilege is enjoyed by a dominant group—whether they are aware of their privileges or not, whether they want it or not, and whether they are well intentioned or not—giving them economic, political, social, and cultural advantages at the expense of members of marginalized groups.

## ■ WHAT IS A SOCIAL GROUP, AND WHO ARE OPPRESSED?

Another way to think about the process or enactment of oppression is when a group of people make it difficult or even impossible for other groups of people to reach their human potential. In other words, oppression is when a social group in power dehumanizes other social groups and keeps them that way (Freire, 1970). This could mean treating oppressed social groups in a degrading or undignified manner (i.e., oppression by imposition or force) or denying them equal rights, privileges, protections, and opportunities that groups in power have, enjoy, and benefit from. Therefore, oppression is essentially injustice (state) and it creates or maintains injustice (process), a vicious cycle—an unjust system—that

perpetually ensures that people will have unequal power and privileges based solely on their social group membership. So what, then, is a social group? According to noted scholar Iris Marion Young (1990), a **social group** is

... a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way. (p. 43)

Using this definition, we can easily see that there are many types of social group categorizations (e.g., by race, sex, age, sexual orientation, abilities, national origin) and, thus, oppression based on group membership may also come in various forms (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, xenophobia). The next question, then, is how do we determine which group is privileged and which group is oppressed in each of the social group categorizations that exist?

There is not one clear, perfect, or one-size-fits-all way of determining whether a social group is oppressed or not. This is primarily because power structures and dynamics may vary *between* societies or countries. For example, a dominant social group in one society (e.g., the Tagalog people in the Philippines hold power over the other ethnic groups in the country) may be a marginalized group in another (e.g., Tagalog people are marginalized in the United States). Even further, power structures and dynamics may vary between the diversity of contexts that may exist *within* a single society or country. For example, a dominant social group in one specific context (e.g., Chinese Americans in a neighborhood that is considered to be the Chinese ethnic enclave of a city, like many Chinatowns) may be a marginalized group in a more macrolevel or larger perspective of the same society (e.g., Chinese Americans are still not represented in city or state governance).

Nevertheless, one useful framework to help guide us as we think about the power dynamics between social groups is Marilyn Frye's (1983) 5-point criteria. According to Frye, the first criterion to help us determine if the social group to which a person belongs is oppressed is that *there must be restrictions, barriers, or limitations on the person's freedoms*. In the case of LGBTQ people, for example, there are limitations in their freedoms to have a family in terms of whom they are allowed to love and marry, and



if they are allowed to adopt children. Second, *the restrictions, barriers, and limitations must be harmful* and the harm outweigh any potential benefits incurred as a result of those same restrictions. Staying with the same example, although people may argue that being single and not having children may present some benefits to LGBTQ people (e.g., no children to look after), the fact still remains that LGBTQ people are not given the same freedom to make such decisions (i.e., decision to get married or not, have children or not). Also, in a more direct manner, there are benefits to being married and having children (e.g., tax benefits, visitation rights in hospitals, “next of kin” recognitions) that are denied to LGBTQ individuals because of the restrictions. Third, *the restrictions, barriers, and limitations must be imposed protected, and justified by a social structure or institution*. We see this in our current society with various forms of laws, policies, and cultural norms that restrict LGBTQ people’s rights. Fourth, *the restrictions, barriers, and limitations must be suffered by people simply because of their social group membership*. This is clearly the case for LGBTQ individuals who are marginalized, ridiculed, discriminated against, and even demonized (or pathologized) simply because of who they are. Finally, the fifth criterion is that *there must be a separate social group that maintains the status quo of oppression and who benefits from the imposed restrictions, barriers, and limitations*. In our LGBTQ example, non-LGBTQ people who impose their ideas of relationships and families and deny equal freedoms and rights to LGBTQ people benefit from such a system of oppression because the “normal” family structure is validated as “acceptable” and the “standard.”

Combining Frye’s 5-point criteria for identifying oppressed groups with Hays’s (2003) influential **ADDRESSING** (*age, disability, religion, ethnicity or race, sexual orientation, social class, indigenous heritage, national origin, gender or sex*) framework for understanding our social identities and where we are in relation to other people, Table 1.1 summarizes the most commonly seen social group categorizations, specifying the privileged (or dominant) and oppressed (or marginalized) groups for each category.

## ■ A VICIOUS SYSTEM: LEVELS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF OPPRESSION

Oppression can exist and operate in the *interpersonal, institutional, and internalized levels* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). Interpersonal oppression can happen between individuals such as when a White person hurriedly locks her car door when she sees a Black person approaching (e.g., Steele, 2010); between groups such as when heterosexual people refer to something that is dumb, stupid, not cool, or undesirable as



**TABLE 1.1 Pamela Hays's ADDRESSING Framework: A Model of Cultural Influences and Their Relationship to Power and Privilege in the United States**

Social Group Categorization	Privileged or Dominant Groups	Oppressed or Marginalized Groups
Age	Early and middle adulthood	Children, adolescents, and elders
Disability	Temporarily able-bodied	People with disabilities
Religion	Christians	Muslims, Jews, other non-Christians, agnostics, atheists
Ethnicity or race	European or White Americans	People of color
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual people	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual people
Social class	Middle and upper class	Poor and working class
Indigenous heritage	Nonnative or non-Indigenous	Native, Indigenous, aboriginal peoples
National origin	U.S. born	Immigrants, refugees, asylees
Gender or sex	Male	Female, transgender people, intersex

Source: Adapted from Hays (2003).

“so gay” (e.g., Nadal, 2013); and even within groups such as when more Americanized Latinx derogatorily refer to less Americanized Latinx as “paisa” or “ghetto” (Hipolito-Delgado, Gallegos Payan, & Baca, 2014). As can be deduced from these examples, **interpersonal oppression** is driven by and expressed as stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. Briefly, **stereotypes** are defined as specific beliefs about a group, such as general descriptions of what members of a particular group look like, how they behave, or their abilities. As such, stereotypes are (over)generalized *cognitive* representations of how members of a group are similar to one another and different from members of other groups. **Prejudice** refers to the attitudes, feelings, or *affective* components of our perceptions about members of certain social groups. The emotions or affect we attach to certain groups may be positive or negative and may be conscious or nonconscious. **Discrimination** is the *behavior* that results from a person’s stereotypes and prejudices. In other words, when one’s actions are driven by biased beliefs and attitudes against a certain group of people, then one is discriminating against that particular group (e.g., racial discrimination, gender discrimination). An easy way to remember these is: **Biased CAB**,

wherein C is cognition for stereotypes, A is affect for prejudice, and B is behavior for discrimination. Biased CAB, therefore, stands for biased cognition, biased affect, and biased behavior and, in many cases, this is the kind of oppression—the interpersonal-level type that often comes out as stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors—that people have in mind when talking about specific forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and others.

Keep in mind, however, that a necessary component of oppression is power and privilege (as discussed in the previous section of “Always remember: oPPression has two Ps”). So just because people may hold certain stereotypes and prejudices that may lead them to behave in a discriminatory manner against some groups of people, their biased thoughts, attitudes, and actions are not oppression unless they are also members of the dominant group that holds power and privileges that other groups do not have. For example, just because an Asian American person may think that all White people are untrustworthy, may be turned off by White people’s assertiveness, and therefore choose to avoid being around White people, this does not mean that the Asian American person is oppressing (more specifically, racially oppressing or is racist against) White people because White people hold more power and privileges in the United States than Asian Americans (e.g., Millan & Alvarez, 2014). In other words, as summarized in Table 1.1 and in the previous section on “What is an oppressed social group?,” an Asian American person may hold stereotypes and prejudices against White people that may lead the person to discriminate against White people, and this is problematic, but the Asian American person is not oppressing White people because White people are the dominant and privileged group. Simply disliking or favoring someone based on their social group membership is problematic but is not automatically oppression; the individual’s biased opinions or behaviors must be backed up, legitimized, protected, and supported by sociopolitical institutions, policies, norms, standards, or assumptions—power and privilege—for the stereotypical beliefs, prejudiced attitudes, and discriminatory behaviors to become interpersonal oppression. An easy way to remember this is *Interpersonal Oppression = Biased CAB+PP*, with PP representing power and privilege.

Even further, it is also important to note that oppression is not always consciously inflicted by ill-intentioned, evil, powerful, and privileged people and the systems, institutions, or policies they create. In many cases, especially in our modern times, even well-intentioned people and the systems, institutions, and policies they develop and uphold may still

inadvertently and unknowingly end up dehumanizing other people, limiting other people's access to resources, and constraining other people's freedoms (unconscious, unintentional, and subtle forms of oppression are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). Because oppression may be very subtle and unnoticed, oppressive rules, standards, norms, habits, symbols, and assumptions can eventually become widely accepted and unquestioned leading to the creation and maintenance of oppressive organizations and institutions. Thus, oppression can also exist and operate at the institutional level through laws, policies, and "normative" assumptions and practices that marginalize and inferiorize groups of people (Jones, 1997). If interpersonal oppression can be conceptualized as when stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination are expressed by individuals toward other individuals, we can conceptualize **institutional oppression** as when stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination are expressed—whether intentionally or unintentionally or even well intentionally, consciously or unconsciously, and overtly or covertly—through organizations' or institutions' policies, laws, regulations, assumptions, standards, cultural norms, and practices. Institutional oppression can be seen through laws (e.g., laws that limit women's freedoms to make decisions about their own bodies), policies (e.g., New York Police Department's "Stop and Frisk" policy), physical environments (e.g., public buildings and venues that are not accessible by wheelchair), and social norms and conventions (e.g., the standard use of the term "maternity leave" to refer to a parent taking time off work due to pregnancy and giving birth).

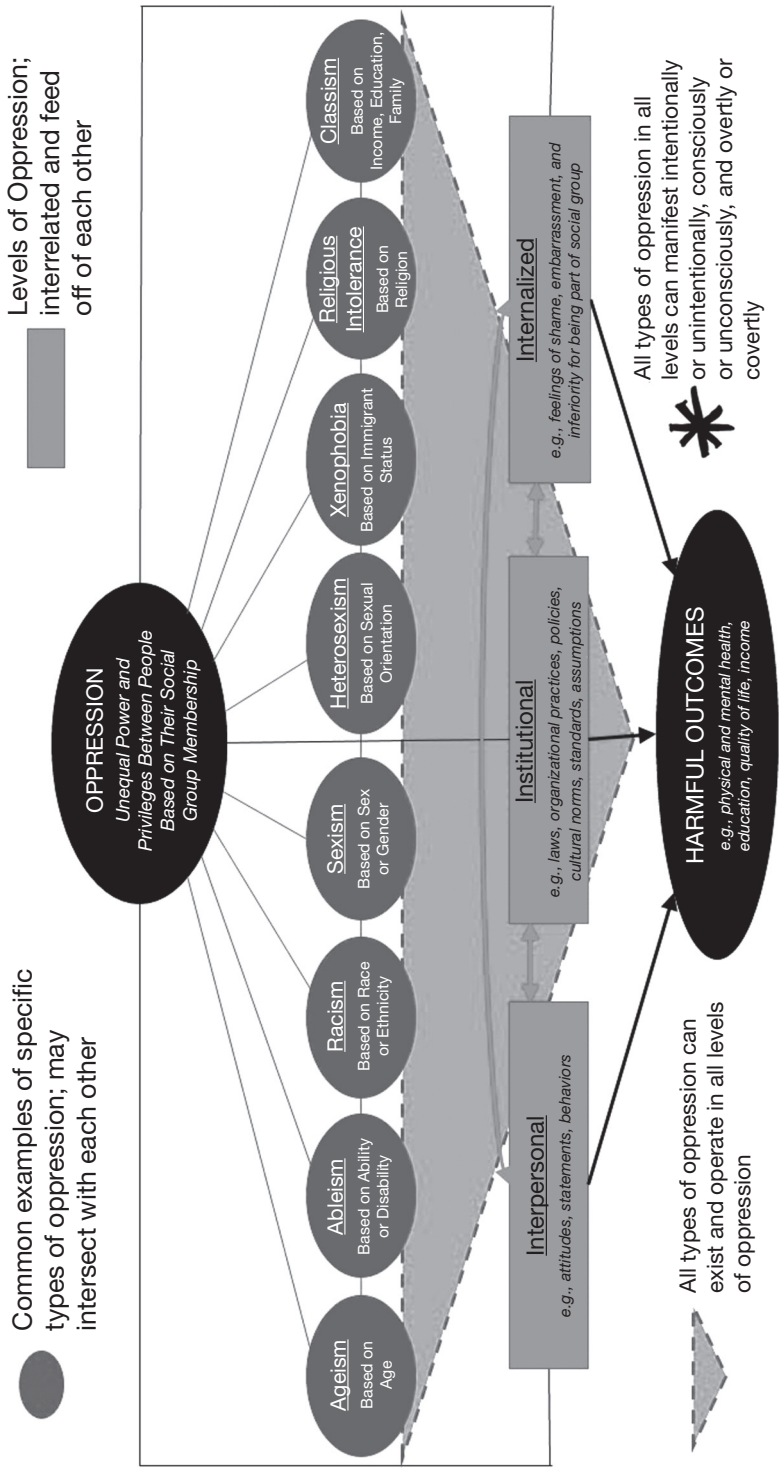
Interpersonal and institutional oppression are linked and they feed off of each other. Stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behavior may lead to the establishment of organizations that have policies, procedures, and practices that in turn reflect, legitimize, and protect those stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors. Such institutionalized unfairness can then shape people to think, feel, and behave in ways that are consistent with the created standards, norms, culture, and climate. Eventually, people may no longer even see that their climate and the beliefs, attitudes, and practices it encourages are oppressive—equating "right" with policies, laws, regulations, and standard operating procedures—forgetting that just because something is "legal" or consistent with the law does not necessarily mean that it is right, fair, or just. In essence, individuals may use their access to power and privilege to impose their worldviews on the oppressed, enforcing the social, political, and systematic denial of resources to the oppressed which, in turn, is used to justify the oppressive behaviors or individuals.

In addition to oppression existing and operating in interpersonal and institutional levels, there is also internalized oppression. As alluded to earlier, oppression may be overt or covert, with contemporary forms of oppression being more subtle than and not as blatant as oppression of the past (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Conzalez, & Willis, 1978; Sears, 1988; Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Thompson & Neville, 1999). Although not as blatant, clear, and obviously brutal as oppressions of the past (e.g., apartheid, Jim Crow laws, regarding homosexuality as a mental disorder), contemporary forms of oppression are still dangerous for oppressed individuals. The fact that modern forms of oppression occur at a subtle, often unconscious, and unintentional level often leads oppressed individuals to experience *attributional ambiguity*, which is when we cannot confidently conclude that we experienced oppression and when we cannot clearly identify the perpetrator of oppression (Sue et al., 2007). In other words, because modern-day oppression is often enacted subtly, unconsciously, and even well intentionally, it is more difficult to determine if comments, behaviors, laws, policies, or assumptions are influenced by some type of social group bias. Thus, people who experience contemporary oppression may frequently dismiss or minimize their experiences and lead them to self-blame: “Oh, it’s my fault, I’m just being too paranoid and oversensitive.” This line of reasoning is dangerous because it might lead us to learn to tolerate oppression or even internalize oppression. When one cannot identify and confront the source of oppression, the anger may be directed inwardly and at others who remind the oppressed of themselves, a condition known as “internalized oppression” (David, 2013, 2014). Using Lipsky’s (1977) definition, **internalized oppression** is the “turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the . . . oppression of the (dominant) society” (p. 6). In these ways, internalized oppression is linked to interpersonal and institutional oppression, and all three levels of oppression feed off of each other and work together to perpetuate oppression. All three are components of the vicious and seemingly inescapable **system of oppression**.

Figure 1.1 pictorially summarizes the different forms, levels, and manifestations of oppression and their relationships with each other.

## ■ WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT OPPRESSION?

In the field of psychology, there is abundant literature on *self-concept*, which is how we perceive ourselves and the characteristics we have



**FIGURE 1.1** The different forms, levels, and manifestations of oppression.

(e.g., Baumeister, 1999). Similarly, there is also an abundance of literature on *self-esteem*, which is how positively or negatively we evaluate the characteristics we have (e.g., Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993; Rosenberg, 1965). Indeed, self-concept and self-esteem have been some of the more core topics in the field of psychology, with such keywords producing 41,674 and 23,748 hits on PsycINFO, respectively. However, psychology's understanding of the self and self-esteem has been incomplete in that it is overly individualistic; that is, our understanding of the self and self-esteem has been focused primarily on the individual component. This individualistic bias is perhaps influenced by the invisible Western privilege the majority of psychological theorists and researchers hold that led to their individualistic worldviews coming through in their work. Some scholars (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) have noted that although we are all individuals, all of us are also social beings who are part of social groups and the social groups to which we belong also have characteristics of their own. Therefore, in addition to having an individual component to our self-concept, we also have a collective component to our self-concept. Even further, if individual self-esteem is how we evaluate our personal characteristics, *collective self-esteem* is how we evaluate the characteristics of the social groups to which we belong. The research literature on collective self-esteem (i.e., only 275 hits on PsycINFO!) has lagged behind research on personal self-esteem, but the research does suggest that both individual and collective self-esteem are important contributors to our mental health and psychological well-being.

Therefore, one pathway through which oppression can harm individuals and communities is by damaging how people perceive and feel about their social groups—that is, oppression may damage their collective self-esteem (the psychological and mental health implications of oppression are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). In other words, oppression of a particular social group may lead its members to see their group as inferior, not as valuable, not as good, not as attractive, or not as worthy as the dominant group. Thus, oppressed individuals may begin to have poor evaluations of the characteristics of their social group (e.g., the language, the beliefs, the cultures, the traditions, the typical physical appearance, the food). Even worse, some individuals may even begin to view their social group membership as an inescapable curse. And because social group membership is an important part of individuals' self-concepts, oppression then can damage one's mental health and psychological well-being. Even further, given that oppression may negatively affect not just individuals' perceptions of themselves but also how they perceive other people, the

groups to which they belong, other marginalized social groups, and the dominant groups, oppression therefore has the potential to also damage families, communities, and societies. This potential to have widespread and devastating impact is probably the most important reason why we need to understand oppression and its many consequences, and figure out ways to address oppression in the interpersonal, institutional, and internalized levels.

Indeed, there is a large and growing body of psychology research that consistently shows how oppression in all of its levels—interpersonal, institutional, and internalized—and in all of its manifestations—conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional or even well intentional, and overt or covert—is detrimental in a variety of ways. As depicted toward the bottom of Figure 1.1, research suggests that oppression may lead to various negative and harmful social, educational, and health consequences. This is consistent with the assertion of psychologists Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) who argued that the “asymmetric power relations (between social groups) lead to conditions of misery, inequality,

**TABLE 1.2 A Partial List of the Characteristics of Oppression**

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- Oppression is both a *process* and a *state*.
  - Oppression as a *state* or *condition* is when there is inequality of power and privileges between groups.
  - Oppression as a *process* or *enactment* is when dominant groups use their power and privilege to constrain the humanity of oppressed groups, and therefore maintain the existing inequalities between groups.
  - Oppression as a process or enactment can be done through *imposition* or *deprivation*.
  - There need to be *unequal power* and *privilege* (the two Ps) between groups for oppression to exist.
  - Power and privilege inequalities must be seen and defined from a *systems-level perspective*.
  - Oppression can be *intentional* or *unintentional*.
  - Oppression can be *overt* or *covert*.
  - Oppression can be *conscious* or *unconscious*.
  - Oppression can exist and operate in three levels: *interpersonal*, *institutional*, and *internalized*.
  - There are various *specific types of oppression* (e.g., age, disability, religion, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, indigenous heritage, national origin, gender).
  - Oppression is *widespread* and has various *negative health and social impacts*.
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exploitation, marginalization, and social injustice” (pp. 129–130). Thus, given the widespread and devastating consequences oppression has had and continues to have on human beings throughout the world, there is a desperate need for all of us to understand (major theories on why oppression happens are discussed in Chapter 7) and address oppression in all of its forms, manifestations, and complexities (promising clinical and community approaches to addressing oppression are discussed in Chapters 8 and 9).

To this end, we close this opening chapter with Table 1.2 that presents a summary of what oppression is and its many forms, manifestations, and consequences that we hope you will find useful as you go through the rest of the book.

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