

## The Difference, Power, & Discrimination Summer Seminar: Theories of Systems of Oppression

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DIFFERENCE, POWER, & DISCRIMINATION  
PROGRAM**

**OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY**

## The Baccalaureate Core Requirement

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- Criteria for a course to be approved as DPD:
  - Have as their central focus the study of the unequal distribution of power within the framework of particular disciplines and course content;
  - Focus primarily on the United States, although global contexts are encouraged;
  - Provide illustrations of ways in which structural, institutional, and ideological discrimination arise from socially defined meanings attributed to difference;
  - Provide historical and contemporary examples of difference, power, and discrimination across cultural, economic, social, and political institutions in the United States;
  - Provide illustrations of ways in which the interactions of social categories, such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and age, are related to difference, power, and discrimination in the United States;
  - Provide a multidisciplinary perspective on issues of difference, power, and discrimination;
  - Incorporate interactive learning activities (e.g., ungraded, in-class writing exercise; classroom discussion; peer-review of written material; web-based discussion group)

## Sample DPD Courses

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecosystem Science of Pacific NW Indians</li> <li>• Language in the USA</li> <li>• Appearance, Power and Society</li> <li>• The Economics of Discrimination</li> <li>• Native American Experience in the 20th Century U.S.</li> <li>• Ethnic Minorities in Oregon</li> <li>• Ethnicity in Film</li> <li>• Power and Privilege in Sport</li> <li>• Multicultural Perspectives in Natural Resources</li> <li>• Environmental Justice</li> <li>• Public Health and Women: Social and Policy Issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gay and Lesbian Movements in Modern America</li> <li>• Languages of Oregon</li> <li>• Disease and Society</li> <li>• Ethics of Diversity</li> <li>• The Civil Rights Movement and Policies</li> <li>• Gender and Law</li> <li>• Sociology of the Family</li> <li>• Multicultural American Theatre</li> <li>• Women: Self and Society</li> <li>• Women: Personal and Social Change</li> <li>• Women in the Movies</li> <li>• Hate, Resistance, and Reconciliation</li> </ul>
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## Structure of the Summer Seminar

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- Three weeks
- 9 am-1 pm, M-F
- For a total of 60 hours
- Comfort (sofas and snacks)
- Community building
- Readings
- Autobiography & personal work
- Theoretical framework of systems of oppression applied to each discipline
- Modeling learning activities
- Facilitating difficult classroom conversations
- Syllabus workshop
- Stipends



### Theoretical Framework: Systems of Oppression

- Drawn from the work of theorists such as :
  - Patricia Hill Collins
  - Peggy McIntosh
  - Marilyn Frye
  - Gloria Anzaldua
  - Audre Lorde
  - Gloria Yamato
  - Marilyn French
  - Judith Butler
  - Michael Kimmel
  - Suzanne Pharr
  - Berniece Sandler
  - Jackson Katz
  - Maurianne Adams
  - Cherie Moraga

### Definitions

- **Difference:** socially constructed binaries that confer dominance or subordination on group members (gender, race, social class, ability, sexual identity, age, religion, country of origin)



### Power: the ability to control or coerce

- Typically defined as “power-over,” the ability to coerce another’s behavior. Power also includes access to social, political, and economic resources.
- In systems of oppression, power accrues to those who most closely approximate the mythical norm—(in the US) male, white, heterosexual, financially stable, young-middle adult, able-bodied, Christian.
- Social institutions (family, education, religion, media, government) reproduce hierarchy and ensure the maintenance of power in the hands of members of the dominant culture by normalizing the dominant culture so that hierarchical orderings based on gender, race, social class, etc. appear natural and inevitable.

### For example:



- We would assume that the hiring, promotion & tenure processes at a college or university are neutral and based solely on merit.
- But the assumption of neutrality masks power relationships based on privilege.
- Power brings unequal distribution of tasks and rewards (starting salary, resources such as time off for research or start-up funds/ travel funds, research assistance, service expectations).
- The result is:
  - 39% of instructional faculty are women;
  - Only 24% of full professors are women, while 51% of instructors are women.
  - Women hold 31% of tenured positions and 44.8% of tenure-track positions.
  - Women professors earn 81% of what male professors earn.
  - 86% of faculty members are white.

## Privilege



- An invisible package of unearned assets.

*Why don't dominant groups see privilege as a problem?*

- They don't know privilege exists in the first place. They're oblivious.
- They don't have to. Privilege insulates them from its consequences.
- They think privilege is just a personal problem. Individuals get what they deserve.
- They want to hang on to their privilege.
- They are prejudiced.
- They're afraid. . . of blame, of guilt, of rejection by their own group if they acknowledge privilege, of loss.

From Allan G. Johnson, Privilege, Power, and Difference, Mayfield Press, 2008.

## For example, white privilege:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.
- I can go into a book shop and count on finding the writing of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
- I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
- I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
- I can easily find academic courses that give attention only to people of my race.
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

## What are the consequences of having power and privilege?

- **One is able to experience one's own perspectives and experiences as normal and "human" rather than gendered or racialized.**
- **One is then able to function rather easily out of this perspective, assuming that one's behaviors reflect generic human behavior.**
- **One usually does not ask such questions as:**
  - Would I think about this differently if I were a woman/a person of color/disabled/poor/LGBT/etc?
  - How might this affect women/people of color/disabled people/poor people/ LGBT people/etc?
  - For example: the Toyota Prius



## Can a Car Be Too Quiet?

- **The hybrid Toyota Prius was engineered to be especially quiet.**
- **But blind people are now protesting the Prius and requesting minimum noise levels for vehicles so that vision-impaired people will be aware of the vehicles.**

## Oppression



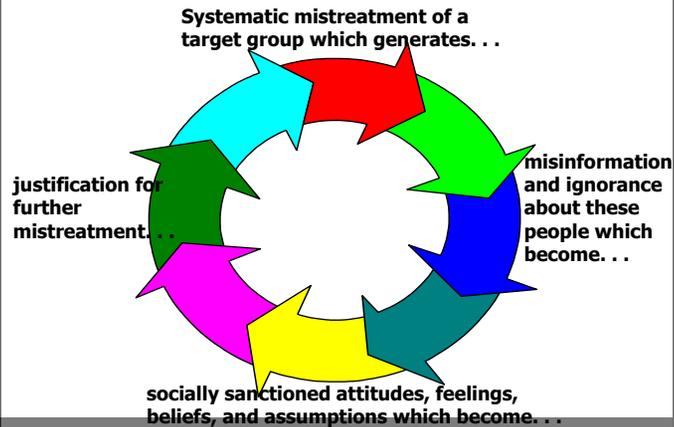
- “The root of the word ‘oppression’ is the element ‘press.’ The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; press the button. Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk . . . Something pressed is caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each others that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. . . One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation.”
  - Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*

## Consider a birdcage. . .



- “The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidentally or occasional and hence avoidable, 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. It is the experience of being caged in.”
  - Marilyn Frye

## The Cycle of Oppression



## Intersectionality: The Matrix of Domination



- “Embracing a both/and conceptual stance moves us from additive, separate systems approaches to oppression and toward what I now see as the more fundamental issue of the social relations of domination. Race, class, and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize Black women’s experiences within a more generalized matrix of domination. Other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix, such as sexual orientation, religion, and age, but the overarching relationship is one of domination and the types of activism it generates.”
- Patricia Hill Collins

### Intersectional analysis will . . .



"refuse primacy to either race, class, gender, or ethnicity, demanding instead a recognition of their matrix-like interaction."

--Johnella Butler

### There is no hierarchy of oppressions.

--Audre Lorde



"Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.

"It is not accidental that the Family Protection Act, which is virulently anti-woman and anti-Black, is also anti-gay. As a Black person, I know who my enemies are, and when the Ku Klux Klan goes to court in Detroit to try and force the Board of Education to remove books the Klan believes "hint at homosexuality," then I know I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you."

### Who Said It Was Simple Audre Lorde

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks  
the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.  
An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see cause in color  
as well as sex.

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations.



In addition to being structured along axes  
such as race, gender, and social class, the  
matrix of domination is structured on three  
levels:

- the level of personal biography;
- the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender;
- and the systemic level of social institutions.

o Patricia Hill Collins

## Dimensions of Oppression




- **The Individual Dimension of Oppression**
  - the ways in which race, gender, and class as categories of analysis frame our individual biographies, the ways we participate in privilege and disadvantage based on our institutional and symbolic statuses.
- **The Symbolic Dimension of Oppression**
  - socially-sanctioned ideologies used to justify relations of domination and subordination. Central to this process is the use of stereotypical or controlling images of diverse gender, race, and class groups.
- **The Institutional Dimension of Oppression**
  - systematic relationships of domination and subordination are structured through social institutions such as schools, businesses, hospitals, the work place. Race, gender, and class place people in distinct institutional niches with varying degrees of penalty and privilege.

--Patricia Hill Collins

## Common Elements of Oppressions




- **A Defined Norm**
- **Institutional Power**
- **Economic Power**
- **Threat of Violence**
- **Lack of Prior Claim**
- **Othering**
- **Invisibility**
- **Stereotyping**
- **Blaming the Victim**
- **Horizontal Hostility**
- **Isolation**
- **Assimilation and Tokenism**
- **Individual Solutions**

• Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*

## The Importance of Understanding Systems




- The problem is not one of bad people (an individual approach) but of oppressive systems in which individuals participate in relative privilege or disadvantage depending on their location in the system.
- For example, not every man (individual) holds institutional power in the same way,
- but within social institutions most positions of power are held by men,
- and other men can identify with the power that accrues to manhood (system) in the institution




## Higher Education as an Institution within Systems of Oppression



- How are systems of dominance and subordination maintained in the way higher education is structured (and structures us)?
- Who has access to higher education?
- Who teaches?
- Who speaks and who is silent?
- How are resources and rewards distributed?
- Which departments/programs/activities have the largest budgets? Which have the smallest budgets?
- Who runs the institution? Who has a voice in decision-making? Who does not?
- Who cooks and cleans? Who answers the phones and opens the mail? Who repairs the toilets?
- Who is represented in the curriculum? Who is omitted?
- Whose learning styles are met by the teaching styles employed?
- For whom are buildings, bathrooms, and walkways constructed?
- Whose interests does the co-curriculum serve?
- How are office workers, maintenance workers, and service workers treated?
- What services are available to meet the specific needs of women, people of color, LGBT people, poor people, older people, people with disabilities?

## The Production of Knowledge

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- How is knowledge constructed in your discipline?
- Who controls the production of knowledge in your discipline? Who controls its dissemination? Who has access to this knowledge and who doesn't? Are there certain questions that get asked and certain questions that don't?
- How do funding structures affect the production of knowledge in your discipline?
- How is knowledge passed on in your discipline? Who controls the means of passing on knowledge?
- Are some people systematically disadvantaged by the way knowledge in your discipline is constructed, produced, and/or taught?
- Is the production of knowledge in discipline gendered or racialized? How is it connected to social class?

## Questions for Curriculum Transformation

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- Who is included in the content of your curriculum? Whose issues are explored? Who is left out?
- Who created and defined your discipline? How did their perspectives affect the ways your discipline was constructed? Whose perspectives were ignored in the development of your discipline?
- What epistemological assumptions undergird your curriculum? How might other ways of knowing reshape your curriculum?
- Who is advantaged in your field? Who is disadvantaged?
- Whose interests does your curriculum serve?
- From whose perspective is your course taught? Whose perspectives are excluded, marginalized, or minimized? How would inclusion of these perspectives change what/how you teach?
- How does your curriculum support and help maintain the dominant culture? In what ways could your curriculum challenge the dominant culture?
- What are the ethical considerations implicit in your curriculum?
- What may be the impact of the application of your curriculum in the real world? Who is affected? In what ways?
- How might your curriculum play a role in effecting social justice?
- Who is advantaged by your teaching style? Who is disadvantaged? How might your teaching style play a role in effecting social justice?