The Costs of Oppression to People from Privileged Groups
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Introduction:
People from privileged groups often see social change as a win-lose situation in which they lose. Even though greater equality would undoubtedly involve giving up and sharing power and resources, social justice would also enrich their lives.

Living is a society where there are systematic, institutionalized inequities affects everyone, whether they are in advantaged or disadvantaged roles. It has profound ramifications that influence and limit how we think about ourselves and others, how and with whom we interact, the opportunities and choices we have about how we interact, and the opportunities and choices we have about how to lead our lives. Although in some instances there are positive effects, there are costs and harmful consequences for all of us, though in different ways.

As members of an interdependent society, what affects some people inevitably affects us all. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1991) reminds us, "All men [sic] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (p. 7).

Specific Costs of Oppression to People from Dominant Groups
We need to name the damaging effects of social injustice on people from advantaged groups without ignoring the larger dynamics of social power in which they occur. ...Whatever the costs are to those in dominant groups, it is not the same as the loss of power, dignity, opportunities, and resources faced by people in disadvantaged groups.

The themes cited highlight consequences or issues that pertain to dominant groups across different forms of oppression.

Psychological Costs:
Loss of Mental health and Authentic Sense of Self
Systems of oppression constrain the ability of people from privileged groups to develop their full humanity. Pressures to fit proscribed roles and to limit one's emotional capacity hinder one's self-development. Diminished self-knowledge and fears further thwart healthy psychological growth.

Socialization Into Roles and Patterns of Behavior
People in dominant groups are socialized to conform to certain rigid standards of behavior. This impedes the exploration of aspects of themselves that do not fit with these expectations. ...Individuals' efforts to conform to expected roles can undermine their ability to know who they are, what they can do, and what they really need.

Denial of Emotions and Empathy
Personal growth is further limited when people attempt to deal with the contradiction between what they are often taught (equality, love, and kindness) and what they are expected to do (treat people inequitably). ...[This] requires people in advantaged groups to deny their owe emotional capabilities, sensitivity, and mutuality. This stifles emotional honesty and hinders the development and use of empathy.

Limited Self-Knowledge and Distorted View of Self
People from privileged groups are routinely denied information and opportunities to understand their role in an unjust social system as well as honest feedback from people in oppressed groups. As result, they are denied self-knowledge.

Discrepancy between External Perceptions and Internal Realities
There is often the discrepancy between external appearances and internal realities. Individuals do not feel like the powerful, privileged people they are presumed to be.

Fears and Pain
There are numerous fears, many of which have social ramifications. Even when people recognize the irrationality or unfoundedness of some of their fears (of certain types of people, of new or different situations), they still find that these fears inhibit their lives and cause psychological distress.

For those with close relationships with individuals from dominated groups, there can be fear for the others' well-being. People from dominant groups find it painful to witness and share in their suffering and mistreatment.

People from privileged groups who support justice often describe the pain they feel when they hear offensive remarks made about disadvantaged groups. It is both psychologically and emotionally upsetting to listen to such disparagement about other people.

Diminished Mental Health
Thomas Pettigrew (1981) identified six criteria for positive mental health: (1) self-awareness and (2) self-acceptance, (3) degree of actualization of one's potential, (4) relative independence from social pressures, (5) adequate perception of reality, and (6) the integration of psychic functions.

As reflected in the above costs, being socialized into an unjust system negatively affects our ability to obtain these components of psychological health. In particular, people from dominant groups tend to develop unhealthy psychological mechanisms (such as denial, false justification, projection, disassociation, and transference of blame) to deal with their fears of minorities or people from oppressed groups (Fernandez, 1996).

Social Costs:
Loss and Diminishment of Relationships
The lack of trust between groups, a social climate that rarely supports relationships across differences (except for between men and women of the same backgrounds), and our socialization, which has fed us misinformation about ourselves and others, undermines relationships. Internalized oppression and social taboos often interfere with positive interpersonal relations among diverse people. Fears, avoidance of different people, and limited experiences and knowledge of others result in less human connection and more isolation.

Isolation from People Who Are Different
The separation people experience from those who are different may be due to an individual's psychological or emotional issues and to the social structures and norms in society. ...Fear and discomfort prevent people from reducing the distance. ...Opportunities for deep, important, gratifying relationships with diverse people are lost. ...Various forms of oppression restrict where we work and play and the ease with which we can have meaningful relationships across differences.

Barriers to Deeper, More Authentic Relationships
It is often hard to develop deep, genuine relationships with people from diverse backgrounds. Numerous barriers interfere with the process.
(1) People from privileged groups often carry a host of fears because of their social position and socialization in an unequal society. ...Because privileged-group members have had limited contact with and have received negative messages about people who are different, they are fearful of going places or having relationships across social-group boundaries.

(2) Stereotypes or prejudgments may prevent contact in the first place or impede real relationships once there is contact.

  (a) People from the dominant group often complain that they are stereotyped and not seen for who they are. They may be judged and avoided on the basis of their social group identity which may feel frustrating and unfair.

  (b) As a result of feeling like they will be judged, people from privileged groups choose to hide aspects of themselves. Hiding aspects of who one is undermines an open and honest relationship.

  (c) People from dominant groups also recognize that their own stereotypes of others (especially in a context that encourages segregation) inhibit their ability to get to know people from oppressed groups or to develop those relationships.

(3) People from privileged groups recognize a lack of trust. They realize it will be harder and slower for people from oppressed groups to be open and honest with them. ...The lack of trust makes it less likely that they will broach difficult subjects or try to work out troublesome interpersonal dynamics.

Disconnection, Distance, and Ostracism Within Own Group
As people from privileged groups speak about barriers to relationships, they often refer to the distance that is created in their own communities and families. Among people with a shared subordinate identity, some individuals may also have a dominant identity that creates a rift within the social group.

Other times, people are ostracized for the choices they make that violate the accepted norms of behavior within their own group. ...If individuals date or marry outside their own racial or class group, they can be disowned by or estranged from their family [—experienced as the pain of rejection, abandonment, and being discredited and discounted].

Moral and Spiritual Costs:
Loss of Integrity and Spiritual Center
Most people like to see themselves as decent, caring, and having principles of fairness and justice. However, they live in a society where there are pervasive inequities... ...Many people grapple with the discrepancy between the reality in which they live and their moral/spiritual beliefs.

Guilt and Shame
Some people feel uncomfortable with the fact that some people have so much while others have so little. They may feel embarrassed or guilty for having more than others. ...As people become more aware of injustices, these feelings and questions [about social inequality and their silent complicity] become harder to ignore, and these moral naggings intensify.

It is shameful to think about how one benefits from the pain or exploitation of others. Often, people feel guilty for not doing more to change inhumane or unjust conditions, for not responding to offensive comments and jokes, or for not taking a stand against injustice.

Moral Ambivalence
Often, people feel torn between acting in accordance with their personal integrity and risking family or societal disapproval, such as giving up significant money to social-change efforts or marrying "one of them."

Spiritual Emptiness or Pain
Perpetuating oppression violates this sense of connection. It also belies the notion of God or Spirit in each person, and undermines the inherent integrity of each individual.

Intellectual Costs:
Loss of Developing Full Range of Knowledge

Neither their formal education nor their own experiences tend to provide people from dominant groups with sufficient and truthful information about their own or other social groups. The lack of relationships and the lack of (accurate) knowledge about people from dominated groups furthers ignorance. People's ability to expand their minds is thwarted.

Distorted and Limited View of Other People's Culture and History
When people in privileged groups are only exposed to the ways and accomplishments of people like themselves, they develop a distorted worldview. When history is recounted from the perspective of the dominant group, they receive only a partial picture of our past.

Ignorance allows people to retain the misinformation and stereotypes about people of other social groups. This, coupled with fears, fosters the avoidance of people and experiences that might challenge their view of the world.

Ignorance of Own Culture and History
People from privileged groups lose not only a clear understanding of others but of themselves. History books, in addition to omitting and distorting the experiences of people from oppressed groups, misconstrue the experiences of people form dominant groups. ...Racism has caused many Whites to let go of their particular ethnic backgrounds to assimilate into mainstream White society, with its resulting privileges.

Material and Physical Costs:
Loss of Safety, Resources, and Quality of life
Oppression creates social conditions that affect people from privileged groups not only personally and directly but indirectly as well.

Social Violence and Unrest
Oppression and inequality tend to breed social unrest. As people feel increasingly mistreated, hopeless, and disconnected from the larger society and its benefits, violence and antisocial behavior increase.

Higher Costs
As it becomes more difficult to find homes and schools that are safe and of good quality, the ones that do exist become more expensive. ...When groups of people are systematically excluded from the labor pool (because of stereotypes, discrimination, or lack of preparation), there are fewer people to choose from which creates higher wage costs. Employers therefore need to spend more to attract qualified people.

Waste of Resources
Keeping an unjust system in place is also extremely expensive. A significant amount of our taxes and economic resources goes to supporting law enforcement and the judicial and penal systems, to providing social support services, and so on. Economic and human resources are directed at addressing the effects of social inequalities, as opposed to ensuring opportunities for all.

Loss of Valuable Employees, Clients, and Customers
When groups of people are impeded from having decent jobs and earning living wages, they are less able to purchase goods and services. This in turn negatively affects the economy. ...When they are hired, if they are unable to bring their whole selves to work (including aspects of their identity or culture) or have to constantly deal with prejudices, they are less creative and productive.

Loss of Knowledge to Foster Societal Growth and Well-being

When groups of people are disenfranchised, given limited opportunities, or have their cultures ignored or obliterated, the society as a whole loses their contributions. We know that different cultures and life experiences can bring fresh perspectives to current problems and issues. ...As a culture, we lose some of the inventive, creative contributions that could be made by many people who are denied a chance to flourish.

Diminished Collective Action for Common Concerns
When attention and energy are directed at addressing the effects of oppression and at individual (or group) survival, they are diverted from other issues that would enhance societal well-being.

Negative Health Implications
There are higher mortality rates for both wealthy and poor people in metropolitan areas with high income inequality (Lynch et al., 1998). ...The larger this discrepancy within a geographic area, the higher the area's death rate is likely to be for people in both rich and poor communities.

Interconnections and Variations
Many of the costs of oppression in fact are overlapping and mutually reinforcing. They build and feed on each other, often creating a vicious cycle.

General Costs to People from Privileged Groups
To maintain inequality, people from advantaged groups must be psychologically conditioned to assume their roles in the social order. The current ideology and social structures reinforce the kind of thinking and behavior that perpetuate injustice that ultimately diminishes all human beings.

According to Paulo Freire (1970), humanization is the vocation of human beings: "As oppressors dehumanize others and violate their [the oppressed people's] rights, they themselves also become dehumanized" (p. 42). Martin Luther King, Jr. (1991) also noted: "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you might be until I am what I ought to be (p. 7).

One of the fundamental human desires is to know and be known. We seek relationships with others that allow us to see them fully and have those others see us fully. We want to be recognized for who we truly are. Oppression prevents this process of mutual recognition. It thwarts our ability to become our authentic selves and to fully know ourselves. It also impedes others from knowing who we are.

Conclusion
Conferred dominance and unearned advantage
Society gives people in dominant groups the power to control and disadvantage others. These so-called privileges "distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups" (Peggy McIntosh 1988:78). They are the products of unjust hierarchies. Unearned advantages are the conditions that currently are available to people in privileged groups that should be had by everyone. ...The goal is not for people in privileged groups to be punished or diminished as human beings but to eliminate the conditions that hurt them and others and to increase the conditions that benefit all our lives.

With greater awareness and understanding of how systems of oppression are not necessarily or fully in their best interests, people from privileged positions would make choices more in keeping with justice and basic morality. With greater social justice, people could have a fuller more authentic sense of self; more authentic relationships and human connection; greater moral consistency and integrity; access to cultural knowledge and wisdom; and improved work and living conditions. There would also be the potential for real democracy in our government and institutions.

Yet simply helping people from privileged groups to understand the personal and societal limitations of oppression does not mean they will readily work to change the current system. There are many in-

centives to maintain the status quo. However, it does create an opportunity for critical thinking and for challenging the win-lose paradigm.

Reflection

1. Which of these costs are the most meaningful to you, most matter to you, why?
2. In consideration of these costs, what individual or societal action might be appropriate?
3. Why might appropriate action not be taken?
4. In response to an understanding of the costs of oppression, what considerations might lead you to change in some way? In what ways might you change?