

## Oppression and Institutional Racism

### Reading:

Gertrude Ezorsky, 1991. "Overt and Institutional Racism." Chapter 1 of *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*. Cornell University Press.

Iris Young, 1990. "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press.

### I. Overt and Institutional Racism

We have discussed several accounts of overt racism, e.g., Appiah, Garcia, Shelby, and implicit bias. We have also discussed indirect racism. Recall Modood:

#### Indirect racism:

A practice or policy may make no reference to race or ethnic groups, but may nevertheless disproportionately disadvantage some groups more than others. For example, a company policy that gives preference in filling jobs to local people is formally non-racist (and even may date from the time when Britain was not multiracial), but if the local population happens to be predominantly white, the policy disadvantages minority groups. If there are no countervailing justifiable reasons in favour of this policy--related, for example, to the efficiency of the business--then this constitutes indirect discrimination. (Modood 250)

Ezorsky defines overt racism as follows:

Overt racist action, as conceived here, takes place only if a harm is inflicted or a benefit withheld either because of the perpetrator's racial bias against the victim or because of that perpetrator's obliging the race prejudice of others. (9)

She defines institutional racism:

Institutional racism occurs when a firm uses a practice that is race-neutral (intrinsically free of racial bias) but that nevertheless has an adverse impact on blacks as a group. (9)

On her view, the purportedly neutral procedures that have the greatest adverse impact are selection for positions or (employment, academic, etc) or benefits through personal connections, irrelevant or questionable qualification standards, and the use of seniority status as a basis for promotion.

Ezorsky suggests that facially neutral institutional procedures are "linked to overt racism" (14). Is the link to overt racism required for an institution to be racist (either on her view or on an adequate account)?

*Disparate impact*: Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) states that employers cannot discriminate on the basis of race (and other protected categories). This includes cases of overt racism, but also has been used to sue companies who use facially neutral criteria that are not strictly tied to the job description and that have the effect of excluding members of a protected group. It is not necessary in such a suit to prove that there was a discriminatory motive for the policy. In the Supreme Court decision *Griggs v. Duke Power*, the court wrote: "the absence of discriminatory intent does not redeem employment procedures or testing mechanisms that operate as 'built in headwinds' for minority groups and are unrelated to measuring job capacity."<sup>1</sup>

Disparate impact cases have drawn attention to the use of irrelevant tests and such to exclude protected groups from jobs and other benefits (also in housing, schooling, etc).<sup>2</sup> However, the doctrine is controversial and has been repeatedly tested.

## II. Oppression

### A. Switching to a Macroscopic & Group Perspective

Marilyn Frye offers a characterization of the phenomenon of oppression in terms of a cage<sup>3</sup>:

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barrier which are not accidental 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: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (4)

Although Frye emphasizes the idea that when one is oppressed, all of one's options are blocked and one is *trapped*, this is not necessarily the case. What's at issue in oppression is that by virtue of one's membership in a particular group one is

---

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Disparate+Impact>

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/supreme\\_court.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/supreme_court.html)

<sup>3</sup> Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.

subject to a set of structures that cause unjust subordination. The birdcage analogy is useful to see how structures rather than individuals may be to blame for one's subordination, it is important not to be misled by the analogy.

Oppression affects individuals insofar as they are members of social groups. Social groups are not just sets of individuals, but are groups whose members are marked as similar along some important dimension which is relevant to how they should be socially viewed and treated. Members of social groups will often have a shared "identity" as members of the group.

## **B. Faces of Oppression** (Young 1990 – in *TF*)

**1. Exploitation:** Exploitation occurs "...through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another. The injustice of class division does not consist only in the distributive fact that some people have great wealth while most people have little. Exploitation enacts a structure relation between social groups. Social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality." (6)

Examples: *gender exploitation*: "transfer of the fruits of material labor to men and transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men." (7)

*Racially specific exploitation*: "Wherever there is racism, there is the assumption, more or less enforced, that members of the oppressed racial groups are or ought to be servants of those, or some of those, in the privileged group..." (7-8)

**2. Marginalization:** Marginalization occurs when "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination." (9) "Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use." (8)

Examples: The elderly, the poor, the disabled. The harm of marginalization is not just the material deprivation experienced, but also the fact that marginals are prevented from "[exercising] capacities in socially defined and recognized ways." (9)

**3. Powerlessness** – "The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. Powerlessness also designates a position in the division of labor and the concomitant social position that allows person little opportunities to develop and exercise skills. The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect." (10)

Examples: Non-professionals are powerless relative to professionals.

**4. Cultural Imperialism** – "To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other." (12)

Examples: Androcentrism. Heteronormativity. Cisgenderism. Marginalization in the US of native Spanish-speakers and Latino culture. Note also *ethnocentrism*:

*An attitude that one's own culture, society, or group is inherently superior to all others. Judging other cultures by your own cultural standards and since, of course, other cultures are different, they are therefore inferior. Ethnocentrism means an inability to appreciate others whose culture may include a different racial group, ethnic group, religion, morality, language, political system, economic system, etc. It also means an inability to see a common humanity and human condition facing all women and men in all cultures and societies beneath the surface variations in social and cultural traditions.* FROM: <http://www.webref.org/sociology/E/ethnocentrism.htm>.

Both individuals and institutions can be ethnocentric.

**5. Systematic Violence** – "What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. What makes violence a phenomenon of social injustice, and not merely an individual moral wrong, is its systematic character, its existence as a social practice." (13) "Violence is systemic because directed at members of groups simply because they are members of that group...The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge...that they are *liable* to violation solely on account of their group identity." (13) This threat deprives people of freedom and dignity.

Ezorsky, Gertrude. "Overt and Institutional Racism." Chapter 1 in *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*. Cornell University Press, 1991. © Cornell University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Young, Iris Marion. "Five Faces of Oppression." Chapter 2 in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2011. © Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Modood, Tariq. "'Difference', Cultural Racism and Anti-Racism." Chapter 9 in *Race and Racism*. Edited by Bernard Boxill. Oxford University Press, 2001. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Crossing Press, 1983. © Crossing Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.236 / 24.636 Topics in Social Theory and Practice: Race and Racism  
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.