Oppression

A Relational Dysfunction

If we don’t get to the root of oppressive behavior, then we risk reproducing the oppressive framework in our own liberation movements.

–SYL KO

Oppression—the unjust allocation and use of power—is arguably the single greatest cause of human and nonhuman suffering and of some of the most perilous environmental problems our planet has ever known.¹ The countless manifestations of oppression range from the seemingly benign to the catastrophic, from the micro (how we treat individuals) to the macro (how we operate as a collective). Rape, war, genocide, child abuse, poverty, environmental degradation, factory farming, terrorism, racism, patriarchy—oppression is manifested in any behavior or system that mirrors and supports the exercising of unjust power and control over another or others.² And oppressive behaviors, as well as the attitudes that accompany them, are self-reinforcing: oppression begets oppression, in a feedback loop. So ending oppression—intercepting and transforming the deeply ingrained patterns of thinking and behaving that form the foundation of global suffering and destruction—is arguably the single most important undertaking of our time.
There have been countless efforts to end various forms of oppression over the course of human history; and with increasing awareness of social problems and structural injustices, more and more oppressions are, fortunately, being dismantled. Despite such changes, however, history manages to repeat itself. Often, when one oppression is diminished, a new one emerges or an existing one is bolstered. For example, at the same time that policies are constructed to limit anti-Semitic practices\(^3\), anti-Muslim behavior is legislated;\(^4\) and although the segregation of black and white people in the US has been abolished, the mass incarceration of black Americans is a growing epidemic.\(^5\) Because we haven't fully identified the deeper principles and structures of oppression—including the psychology that enables it—we've targeted the manifestations of oppression while leaving its core intact, like weeding a garden and leaving the roots behind to fester and proliferate. When we don't understand the broader system, or metasystem, that lies beneath and beyond specific forms of oppression, we risk trading one oppression for another or enabling the same oppression to shapeshift into a new form, even as we work toward social transformation.

Understanding the metasystem of oppression not only prevents us from repeating history but also enables us to more fully and effectively bring about social transformation: it motivates us to unite across social causes so that our efforts become greater than the sum of their parts. For example, although we may choose to focus our energy on ending global poverty, we can at the same time maintain an awareness of the interconnectedness of global poverty and other forms of oppression, such as racism, patriarchy, and nonhuman animal exploitation. We can actively raise awareness of the oppressive mindset that breeds all oppressions, so that regardless of the focus of our social change work, our efforts are contributing toward ending oppression more broadly. We interrupt the wider pattern of oppressive thinking and avoid inadvertently reinforcing the very attitudes, behaviors, and policies that create structural inequalities in the first place.
Understanding the metasystem of oppression also enables us to interrupt and shift the pattern of oppressive thinking and behaving in our personal lives, which is necessary both for the creation of a more just and compassionate world and for our own well-being. The same attitudes and behaviors that enable social oppression and the oppression of nonhuman animals and the environment also enable interpersonal and even intrapersonal abuse, and all levels are mutually reinforcing; each feeds the other. When we break the oppressive pattern on any of these levels, we not only cease reinforcing oppression but also help to transform it. (By including the interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions in my analysis, I do not mean to minimize the very real phenomenon of widespread oppression toward vulnerable groups, a point I discuss throughout this book.)

**BEYOND A HIERARCHY OF OPPRESSIONS**

Oppressions often exist alongside—rather than above or below—one another. However, many of us who are working toward social transformation tend to think of oppressions in a competitive hierarchy, with some being more worthy of attention than others. (Although from a strategic perspective it is important to consider which causes or oppressions to prioritize, very often arguments about prioritization reflect personal value judgments rather than strategic considerations.) And we may assume that one form of oppression underlies all other forms of oppression—thinking, for example, that if patriarchy or class conflict were abolished, then colonialism would topple. So we can view oppressions like rungs on a ladder, and compete to secure the top position for the oppression about which we are most concerned.

Of course, some oppressions are informed by others. For example, patriarchy gives rise to sexism, heterosexism, and genderism. So patriarchy is the ethos, or the backdrop, from which these other oppressions emerge. However, although patriarchy informs
genderism, it does not necessarily give rise to racism or classism. Rather, patriarchy *intersects* with these other oppressions, meaning that it reinforces and is reinforced by them; and together, these oppressions create a distinct social category. (This concept was identified by attorney-activist Kimberle Crenshaw and it’s discussed in upcoming chapters.) For example, women of color are more likely than white women or men of color to live in poverty, and as economically disadvantaged women of color, their social experience is distinct from that of economically disadvantaged white women or men of color.7

The assumption that oppressions exist in a competitive hierarchy can limit our effectiveness in working toward social change, as those of us working for different causes can end up arguing against one another in an attempt to secure the top rung of the hierarchical ladder, rather than uniting with one another to abolish the very notion of the ladder, a construct that lies at the heart of the metasystem of oppression. (I am not suggesting that hierarchies are inherently problematic. Some hierarchies are natural and necessary. The problem arises when factors that should not be arranged in a hierarchy—such as moral worth—are.) And in our infighting, our respective movements can end up cannibalizing themselves. To be sure, infighting among social justice advocates sometimes reflects differences in opinion that stem from evolving ideas and strategies that can lead to positive change, as when feminists of color challenge the racism of mainstream feminism and demand greater inclusivity. However, challenging ideas is not the same as competing for one’s cause to be considered more worthy of attention than others, the latter of which is a mindset that typically leads to destructive fighting, rather than productive growth, among social justice advocates.

Indeed, although different oppressions are experienced differently by their respective victims, the mentality that enables oppression is the same. The same mindset that makes it possible for us to support or tolerate genocides around the world produces and main-
tains a culture of classist exploitation at home and enables us to justify the confinement of sentient nonhuman animals in factories where their bodies are turned into food. Once we step outside the oppressive mentality, we can appreciate that oppressions are more like spokes on a wheel than rungs on a ladder, with some select spokes branching out into offshoots, and some intersecting with others.

**THE MYTH OF A HIERARCHY OF MORAL WORTH**

Thinking of oppressions hierarchically can reflect (and reinforce) a belief in a hierarchy of moral worth. It is this very myth that forms the foundation of the mindset that drives oppression, the oppressive mentality. The oppressive mentality is a psychological mindset that informs the way people think and feel, and, ultimately, the way they relate.

According to this myth, some individuals or groups are more worthy than others of moral consideration, of being treated with integrity—that is, in a way that reflects the core moral values of justice and compassion that are shared across cultures.8 This hierarchical view of moral worth means that we deny the dignity—the inherent worth—of certain individuals or groups. (Dignity is, perhaps not surprisingly, the core concept of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has laid the foundation for understanding and honoring international social justice.)

The belief in a hierarchy of moral worth is one reason we don’t recognize certain individuals as victims of oppression, even when they are; people need to hold a certain moral status in society in order to be recognized as vulnerable to victimization. For example, for decades, psychologists noted that girls and women who were forced by familiars into sexual interaction (a phenomenon we refer to today as being sexually assaulted) subsequently exhibited a number of distressing symptoms. However, rather than recognize such
symptoms as indicative of traumatization—of having been overpowered and controlled—psychologists diagnosed the girls and women as “hysterical,” as suffering from personal neuroses. It wasn’t until the 1970s, when the women’s liberation movement had sufficiently elevated the social (and thus moral) status of females, that such symptoms were recognized as hallmarks of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that girls and women were acknowledged as victims of such sexual assaults.

When we look at the issue of inherent worth and moral consideration through the lens of psychology, we can appreciate that the belief in a hierarchy of moral worth is deeply dysfunctional and a key driver of oppression. Oppression drives and is driven by a way of relating that is squarely based on the denial of dignity and the violation of integrity. Regardless of who another is or what another has done—whether they are our colleague, our family dog, or a convicted murderer—when we view and treat them in a way that denies their dignity, we demean them and violate our core moral values in the process. Indeed, our psychological, social, and emotional experience is defined and redefined by how we relate—with other humans, with the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet, and with ourselves—and injuries to our sense of dignity, on the collective and individual levels, lie at the heart of much psychological and relational dysfunction.

Using a psychological lens to look at the belief in a hierarchy of moral worth also helps us see how such a belief is, in fact, inaccurate. Each of us is a composite of the traits and genetic makeup we inherited and our minute-to-minute experiences. The choices we make, the paths we follow, reflect this synthesis of our biology and environment. Expecting that any of us should be different from who and how we are at any given moment is like expecting a tree that’s been rained on not to be wet. Some child abuse survivors, for example, go on to be “high achievers” and to break the pattern of abuse in their family systems, while others do not. Perhaps the former group had fewer inherent psychological vulnerabilities or had a positive role model outside the family or had access to infor-
mation that gave them enough understanding of trauma to be more resilient. Any number of factors could have influenced the experience of members of each group such that the trajectories of their lives shifted in one direction or another.

Most of us recognize that factors such as physical appearance, intelligence, and financial power should not be the criteria by which we determine whether someone has inherent worth or deserves moral consideration (even though we don’t necessarily act accordingly). However, we have yet to accept that all criteria for such categorization are problematic. This does not mean that we don’t hold people accountable for their actions, socially and interpersonally. It simply means that we don’t judge anyone as more or less worthy of moral consideration. For example, if we learn of a manager at a company mistreating their coworkers and embezzling money, we may inevitably feel legitimate anger and want them held accountable for their actions—fired from their position and charged with criminal behavior—but we don’t have to perceive them as an inferior being. That is to say, we can recognize and respond to problematic behavior without feeling the charge of contempt that signals we’ve elevated ourselves to a position of moral superiority. We can create more compassionate and just relationships and societies when we honor the dignity of all individuals, even as we work to change harmful attitudes and behaviors.

Moreover, scholars have long debated whether moral consideration should be extended to life beyond humanity. More and more philosophers are recognizing that speciesism—the ideology that places animals on a hierarchy of moral worth, with humans at the top—is in fact an expression of human supremacy, an attitude that, when philosophically deconstructed, is like other forms of supremacy and proves to be morally indefensible. Thus the thesis I present in this book includes the assumption that nonhuman beings as individuals (as well as the ecosystems that comprise them) possess inherent worth and are deserving of moral consideration of their interests.
OPPRESSION AS A RELATIONAL PHENOMENON

Although multiple factors, such as powerful economic and other institutional forces, give rise to and help maintain oppression, one key factor, which has only recently begun to receive significant attention, is psychology. In many ways, oppression is a psychological phenomenon; the institutions that sustain oppression are created by and for people, and people are psychological beings. And such institutions and other oppressive structures (e.g., norms and traditions) are in large part driven by, and depend on maintaining, an oppressive mentality.

More precisely, oppression is largely a relational phenomenon. Relational dynamics—dynamic interactions that are informed by psychology and that exist between individuals and groups—underlie virtually all human activity. Indeed, for oppression to exist, there must be at least two entities that are in relationship with one another: the oppressor and the oppressed. Oppression reflects and reinforces a relational dysfunction, a pathology in how individuals and social groups relate—to others, the world, and themselves. When we look at the various ways in which oppression is manifested, we can see that they all reflect a way of relating that is inherently damaging to relationships, and often ends up destroying them—and our lives and world are built on relationships. Whether they are brief and benign, enduring and profound, with ourselves or another, between two people or among two million individuals, relationships are a constant: all of us are always in relationship because we are always relating. Indeed, the social systems of which we are a part are themselves simply aggregations of interpersonal dynamics, of relationships.

Most of us recognize relational dysfunction when we see it—for example, between spouses in an unhealthy marriage or among verbally abusive online commentators or warring religious sects. What we typically don’t realize is that the same dysfunctional dynamics underlie all problematic relationships, including those played out on the societal stage. A spouse who invalidates and dis-
misses the experience and needs of their partner is engaging in the same type of dysfunction as an ageist culture that invalidates and dismisses the experiences and needs of older people.

Most of us also recognize relational health when we see it enacted in various personal relationships and social arrangements. Yet we typically don’t realize that, for example, a spouse who honors their partner’s dignity—who treats their partner as though they are inherently worthy and thus deserve to be empathized with, to be treated fairly, and to feel safe—is engaging in the same healthy relational dynamic as that of a society that encourages policies and practices that honor the dignity of members of more vulnerable groups while also seeking to empower such groups so that they are no longer vulnerable in the first place.

Despite the central role that psychology (and, by extension, relationality) plays in enabling oppression, those working toward social transformation rarely give it the attention it deserves. Discussions about social change have typically been centered around ideology and philosophy. Ideological considerations tend to focus on content—on what end, what kind of system, to work toward (e.g., democracy or benevolent dictatorship, capitalism or socialism). Philosophical considerations sometimes also focus on means, but they address the process, or the means, as well. One critical philosophical consideration is the question of whether an ethical end justifies unethical means: Is it ethical, for instance, to use weapons to create a less violent social order—to use the same tools to try to end oppression that helped create the oppression in the first place? Such questions remain unanswered when not also looked at through the lens of psychology. Approaching ideology or philosophy as devoid of psychology is like approaching language as devoid of grammar: words alone are not enough to create a coherent and productive conversation.

If we wish to transform oppression, we must understand the psychology, the mentality, that underlies all oppressions and that is causing us to wreak havoc on humanity, devastate billions of nonhuman animals, and destroy our very planet. We must also
understand the relational dynamics this mentality gives rise to. As authors Aph and Syl Ko point out, we can’t create effective liberation movements without understanding the anatomy of oppression.\textsuperscript{17} Transforming oppression requires not simply the abolition of oppressive policies and practices but the transformation of the way we think and, ultimately, relate. Thus, it requires an understanding of the psychological processes that inform our relationships with ourselves and others so that we can shift from operating within a (largely unconscious) dysfunctional and nonrelational model to living consciously within one that is healthy and empowering. Examining and deconstructing the oppressive mentality and its manifestations, and illuminating its alternative, is the focus of this book, and we’ll discuss specific strategies for change in chapters 7 and 8.

**RELATIONALITY AND RELATIONAL BEHAVIORS**

To help cultivate healthier relationships in our lives and world, we need to understand what relationality is—specifically, what relational (and nonrelational) behaviors and dynamics look like. We also need to appreciate how relational and nonrelational behaviors are informed by, and inform, the systems of which we are a part.

There is a growing body of research on relationality.\textsuperscript{18} However, for our purposes—understanding relationality across all three relational dimensions—perhaps the most notable research comes from the field of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). RCT holds that relationships lie at the core of individual and social functioning, and that healthy relationships, which comprise healthy relational behaviors,\textsuperscript{19} are essential for individual and social well-being. Other significant research on relationality comes from attachment theory, which holds that the way we attach to others is central to how we view and behave toward others and ourselves.\textsuperscript{20}

Healthy relational behaviors are those that create a sense of connection and foster a sense of security and mutual empowerment
(factors that we’ll discuss more fully in upcoming chapters). They reflect the practice of integrity\textsuperscript{21} and honor the dignity of all participants. In contrast, nonrelational behaviors create a sense of disconnection and foster a sense of insecurity and disempowerment. They violate integrity and harm dignity.

Although the prevailing assumption among psychologists in most societies has been that healthy psychological functioning requires a high degree of autonomy, this individualistic model has been increasingly challenged. Numerous studies have shown that humans are both inherently and highly relational: we’re hardwired to need connection with others, and we’re harmed by the experience of disconnection.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, we thrive, both emotionally and neuropsychologically, when we feel secure and empowered in our relationships, and we are negatively impacted, psychologically and biologically, by affronts to our dignity—by behaviors that deny our inherent worth.

Moreover, fascinating new research on the neuropsychology of attachment suggests that our attachment style, the way we attach to others, has a profound impact on many critical aspects of our personal and relational experience: it helps determine our capacity for trust and empathy, our ability to feel secure in (nonthreatening) relationships and within ourselves, and our capacity for intimacy.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, our attachment style influences whether we are attuned to our needs and the needs of others, and whether we validate and respond to those needs (when healthful and appropriate); whether we tend to be controlling, insensitive, or defensive; and whether we respect our boundaries and the boundaries of others. Perhaps most notably, our attachment style helps determine our sense of self-worth and our perception of the worth of others, as well as whether or not we honor such worth.

When our attachment style is insecure, we are more likely to engage in nonrelational behaviors, by either directing them toward others or allowing others to direct them toward us, or both. We tend to have lower self-worth and therefore to be more defensive against constructive criticism, perceiving it as an affront to our dignity. We
tend to feel either inferior or superior to others and to act accordingly. When our attachment style is secure, we are more likely to engage in relational behaviors. We have a healthier sense of self-worth, feeling neither superior nor inferior to others, and we tend to be more receptive to information that challenges us to grow.

Although our attachment style is largely the result of our hard-wiring and our earliest experiences with our primary caregivers, research suggests that it is also affected, and can even be changed, by relationships throughout the course of our life. So our attachment style influences and is influenced by that of others, for better or worse. And although actually switching our attachment style is believed to result from a more prolonged and/or intense relationship, casual interpersonal dynamics, particularly if such dynamics are prevalent—enacted by multiple individuals and carried out repeatedly—may nevertheless push us along the attachment spectrum in one direction or another. Moreover, because neither individuals nor relationships exist in a vacuum, the systems of which we are a part—systems that are themselves composed of myriad relationships—may play a role in shaping our attachment style.

Looking at a system through the lens of attachment is one way we might assess whether the system is healthful or dysfunctional—whether it is relational or nonrelational. And it should come as no surprise that systems which cultivate and reflect insecure attachment are oppressive. Oppressive systems may well create the very conditions—intrapersonally, interpersonally, and socially—that damage a core driver of personal and relational well-being: our ability to attach securely.

**OPPRESSION AND ABUSE**

In order to work toward improved relational well-being, social and interpersonal, it is important to recognize the similarities and differences between oppression and abuse. Oppression is the unjust allocation and use—the abuse—of power. Social or collective unjust
allocations and abuses of power are usually referred to as “oppression,” and interpersonal ones, including those that occur in groups such as families or workplaces, are usually referred to as “abuse.” In all cases, however, the dynamic—the way of interacting—is the same: an unbalanced allocation of power and the process of abusing power that enable social oppression also enable interpersonal abuse. (Similar abusive dynamics can sometimes be carried out intrapersonally. When I refer to interpersonally abusive dynamics in this book, often the same points apply to intrapersonal dynamics, though I won’t always note that this is the case.)

However, oppression and abuse are of course not identical phenomena. Although the psychological process that underlies each phenomenon is often the same, oppression and abuse differ in two key ways.

First, oppression is always systemic—embedded within a system—whereas abuse can be either an isolated behavior or systemic, existing within a relationship or group where there is an imbalance of power (such as between that of a batterer and their partner or between a boss and a subordinate). Many people will, for example, occasionally engage in abusive behavior, as when in the midst of a heated argument an angry spouse says things they know will hurt their partner. Although problematic, this kind of behavior is not necessarily part of a pattern that informs a system. In an abusive system, the abuser consistently holds power over the other, and this imbalance of power creates the dynamic which mirrors that of oppressive dynamics.26 For example, even during so-called good times, an abusive spouse may still wield power and control over their partner by doing things such as soliciting information about the partner’s vulnerabilities that the abuser can later use against them. In an abusive system, the powerholder seeks to maintain and often grow the power imbalance within the system, to hold power and control over the other; abuse is just a means to that end.27

The second difference between abuse and oppression is that, unlike abuse, oppression is institutionalized, in that it is embraced and maintained by all major social institutions. This is why there is no
such thing as “reverse oppression.” Oppression, by definition, must be housed within a system in which there is an unjust allocation—an unfair imbalance—of power on the societal, or social level. So although some women can, for example, act abusively to men, they cannot oppress men, because women have less social power than men.

Often, oppressive dynamics inform abusive ones. Social scientists and social change agents are well aware of how social power relations—the dynamic between social groups when one has more power than the other, as with men and women—trickle down to influence interpersonal power relations, the dynamic between individuals when one has more power than the other. For example, in the 1960s, feminists pointed out how institutionalized patriarchy—the socially sanctioned oppression of women and girls that is manifested through sexist attitudes, behaviors, and policies—was a cause of men abusing women in interpersonal relationships. Both men and women had been conditioned to believe that husbands had the right to control their wives; therefore a number of married men engaged in abusive and controlling behaviors, and their wives didn’t recognize such behaviors as abusive and simply accepted them as normal and appropriate.28

Conversely, when we abuse power interpersonally, we contribute to a broader collective dysfunction, because we as individuals make up the broader society. Obviously, the influence of social power relations on individuals is far greater than vice versa. However, on both levels—social and interpersonal—the process of abusing power is mutually reinforcing: each level feeds the other, and the difference is a matter of degree.

**POWERARCHY: THE METASYSTEM OF OPPRESSION**

I propose that oppression results, in large part, from the synthesis of a power dynamic (a relational dynamic based on a particular model of power) and a system that provides the structure, or guidelines, for enacting the power dynamic. This combination creates a
particular type of system that I refer to as a *powerarchy*. Powerarchies are fundamentally nonrelational; their core premise—that moral worth exists on a hierarchy—and the power dynamics that reflect and reinforce this premise are relationally dysfunctional. Powerarchies damage relationships, and they violate the integrity and harm the dignity of the individuals within them. Powerarchies cause us to violate the first precept of relating, the Golden Rule, and in so doing, they lie at the heart of the relational paradox described in the introduction.

This model for understanding oppression is thus *relational*. It examines how oppression informs and is informed by human interaction in all three relational dimensions: social/collective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. It is *inclusive* as well, because, although it is grounded in psychology, it includes ideological and philosophical considerations; it also includes in its analysis how humans relate to nonhuman animals and the environment, something other models of oppression have largely failed to do. Moreover, the model is *descriptive*; it describes the defensive structures and strategies that uphold oppression in relation to one another. And, finally, it is *explanatory*, in that it seeks to explain oppression—from a relational perspective—while recognizing that such an explanation is building on those that came before and paving the way for further discussion and investigation.

The good news is that just as oppression begets oppression, so too does liberation beget liberation. So when we understand the nature and structure of powerarchy, we have a deeper understanding not only of oppression but also of liberation. And we can work more fully toward transformation for ourselves, others, and our world.