

# Race, Identity, Stereotyping and Voluntary Oppression

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## Abstract

*Many immigrants and their children ask themselves the question of identity. Often we allow others to identify us and colonize our consciousness. Once we are “given” our identities, we are then stereotyped because of them. We then reap the benefit, or the disadvantages of our stereotypes. In turn social stereotypes that surround us, further shape our self-identity and consequently, the decisions we make. If we have no other outlet or if we feel as though there are no other options, we live those stereotypes. Some are harmful to us and leave us in the disadvantages places even to oppression of ourselves. In this paper, I discuss some harms of stereotyping, how it leads to voluntary oppression, and make some suggestion for ending racial oppression.*

## Introduction

The question of identity has been a central question for every immigrant generation. Sometimes that question fades away in time and people become a member of the society that they reside in. For instance, original British immigrants to the United States no longer self-identify as “British.” They are Americans. Some of us in the United States can get away by being the “non-raced” individual: the *generic person*, using Michael Kimmel’s terms (Kimmel, 2000). Others, not so. Chinese immigrants, regardless of being in the United States virtually since there was such nation, will never just be “American” although they might have no connections left to China or Chinese culture.

Some will argue that my categorization is somehow flawed; racist perhaps. We should be color-blind. Most of us are not, physically or rhetorically. We see physical differences between people and generally that is an indication of what part of the world our ancestors evolved. Since we are not isolated people and live in a very culturally and racially diverse society, it is important for us to understand ourselves in the context of such

society in order to decide how we conduct our lives.

However, my paper is not merely about identity, nor is it about the Chinese. It is, however, about allowing others to *identify* us and colonize our consciousness. I have lived in the United States for over 20 years. About 13 years into it, September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the Twin Towers happened and I found myself *becoming* Iranian. Not by my choice. It was perhaps the worst time, for me, to do so. I became Iranian because others wanted me to be. They wanted me to explain the terrorists, as though I had a gene that codes for the understanding of the terrorists. I am afraid (or not for that matter) that I don't have such gene. So they quickly realized that I was not really useful in that manner. Others wanted me to be Iranian so they could say that they have me as a friend and so they are not racist against middle-easterners or that Iranians too can be healed. There was even a small group who wanted me to be Iranian so they could hate me. I symbolized the terrorist the same way that the prison guards symbolized the law that kept the prisoners in. So, I had to reinvent myself in the new context. I had to decide who I was to myself and to others as a tool or otherwise. This is the question that many immigrants, consciously or unconsciously ask themselves.

Each person has a history behind him or her – a history that one has no part of making nor asks to be a part of. People reap the benefit or the disadvantages of the life they are born into. The social stereotypes that surround us, shape our identity and consequently, the decisions we make. If we have no other outlet or if we feel as though there are no other options, we live those stereotypes. Some are harmful to us and leave us disadvantaged even to the point of oppression of ourselves. One might believe this to be an unlikely phenomena but psychological oppression is an uncontested concept. I am merely referring to it for what it really is, “voluntary self-oppression”. In this paper, I discuss stereotyping, its effect on self-identity and how it leads to voluntary oppression. I conclude with some suggestions regarding what can be done in order to end racial oppression and how to effectively minimize its consequences on people today. First, a bit about oppression.

## **Voluntary Oppression**

Oppression has been traditionally understood to refer to the loss of one's freedom, liberty, or capabilities due to active actions of those in power (government). Fifty years ago, if asked, many would refer to the Holocaust or slavery as examples of oppression. Nowadays oppression includes a much broader understanding. Oppression, as Iris Young says, can refer to "systematic and structural phenomena that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant" but rather they could be found in everyday minds and actions of each citizen, some well-meaning liberals, whether we know it or not (Young, 1988).

The reality is that oppression is much more subtle than we once thought. It is "civilized", as Jean Harvey puts it. *Civilized oppression* "involves neither physical violence nor the use of law. Yet these subtle forms are by far the most prevalent in Western industrialized societies" (Harvey, 1999). In order to better understand our society, we must recognize all kinds of oppression, including those that are not *prima facie* categorized as such, and those that do not have any one specific oppressor. We might find that most of us participate in oppression of others or ourselves in ways that are quite harmful to others or ourselves (Harvey, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this identification would help in ending the attitudes that cause them.

In her article, *Oppression by Choice*, and her recent book, *Analyzing Oppression*, Ann Cudd gives us four criteria for oppression that are necessary and jointly sufficient (Cudd, 1994, 2006). These criteria are, first, "oppression must involve some sort of physical or psychological harm..." (Cudd, 1994, p. 25). Oppression is always a harm but not any harm done is oppression. Oppression is a harm that unjustly limits one's "freedom or choice *relative* to other in one's society" (Cudd, 1994, p. 25).

Second, harm must be inflicted on a social group due to their membership in that group by another social group (Cudd, 1994, p. 25). Social groups are those that individuals belong to "independently of their oppressed status... [one] that they closely identify with, so that the harm attaches to their very self-image" for instance, race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious groups (Cudd, 1994, p. 25). Individuals cannot be oppressed as individuals but as members of a particular group. A white heterosexual man who has been robbed is not oppressed but he is certainly a victim of crime and harmed. However, if society systematically targets that group for robbery, then we can say that he does belong to a group that is

harmed because of his group membership and hence, is oppressed. Furthermore, every member of an oppressed group is oppressed. *Prima Facie* Michelle Obama, is not oppressed although African American women in our society are. She faces the same fears and limitation as all other (Black) women in less powerful positions in society.<sup>2</sup> Women fear being attacked, raped, or become victims of sexual assault, regardless of the social status that they (we) might hold. Being an African-American woman she has barriers to cross that White women do not. In short, although some people who belong to the oppressed group might not appear oppressed, they nonetheless are.

Third, the social group that is doing the oppressing must benefit from the oppression. That does not mean that *every* single member in the group that is benefiting is actively and knowingly an oppressor but they benefit from the membership in that group. Cudd refers to this group as the “privileged group” (Cudd, 1998).

Lastly, oppression must include some kind of coercion or force. Coercion is “lack of voluntary choice” (Cudd, 1994, p. 27). So, coercion is not “absence of all choice, but a lack of the right kind of choice” and that is voluntary choice (Cudd, 1994, p. 27). According to Cudd, coercion is always wrong and is what accounts for the injustice of oppression. So, to say that oppression is an injustice, it has to be forced (or coerced). She adds, to judge something (objectively) coercive it ought to be looked at from a moral background rather than an empirical one. So, if someone does not believe that they are not coerced, it does not follow that they are not.

My theory of oppression closely parallels Cudd’s with some revisions. I will only concentrate on coercion criterion. I do not believe we need to consider coercion as always immoral to explain the injustice of oppression. Often, more subtle kinds of oppression are not coercive. Consider cases of psychological oppression. According to Sandra Bartky, “To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise harsh dominion over their own self-esteem. Differently put, psychological oppression can be regarded as the ‘internalization of intimations of inferiority’.” (Bartky, p. 105)

These are cases where there is no coercion or force involved, individuals have the “free choice” to make decisions beyond the ones they did make and so there is no “lack of voluntary choice.” The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors. The choices are perhaps socially or politically available to them, but they will only make choices that their society or culture demands of them. I suggest that we take the coercion criterion out. Our theory will still pick all the instances of oppression but does not have to get bogged down with another complicated element as coercion. However, although implicit in Cudd’s criteria, let us make explicit the systematic criterion. What I mean by that is, oppression does not happen in isolation but rather there are many forces that work together to keep people in their oppressed situation (Frye, 2005).

I will end this section by illustrating my theory with an example. Mexican-Americans are kept in the lower status in our society, mainly because they are Mexicans. They are “used” for cheap labor. They do the majority of our hard labor and dirty work so our children or we won’t have to. Many of the field workers are illegal immigrants who do not have the rights that the legal immigrants enjoy, and because of that (and perhaps lack of communication abilities with their bosses) they are often exploited. They are not paid minimum wage and are forced to work under harsh conditions. These workers are paid very small wages (harm), because they are Mexicans (group membership)<sup>3</sup>, so the landowners who are the wealthy can benefit (the privilege group). They are not only harmed in this one particular way. If mistreated, beaten, or raped by their overseers they are not protected by law so they cannot report to the police – their illegal status will be revealed and they would be even worse off than they were. Even if the workers are legal with work visas, if they report their unjust work situations, they would jeopardize their future employment (Bauer, 2007).

In some states like California the children of the illegal immigrants are unable to go to school or daycare because these institutions will not receive government funding for allowing undocumented children to attend. Consequently, they are kept in their state of poverty. They often cannot go back to Mexico because there are no available jobs and they or their families will starve. There are just a few examples of how in the United States, there are many forces that systematically keep the Mexicans in a disadvantaged position and discriminate against them. There are many forces that work against them to keep them in their oppressive situation.<sup>4</sup>

Physical mistreatment is not the only way to oppress people. Indeed the most effective tool a society could use to perpetuate the oppression of a group is through non-physical methods. In the next section, I will discuss stereotyping and how that plays an important role in the continuing oppression of a group.

## **Stereotyping**

Research shows that stereotyping a group has significant impact on the way the individuals within the group self-identify. Both negative and positive stereotyping can have negative effects. In several studies by J. T. Jost and M. R. Banaji, “stereotyping emerged as a fairly unambiguously negative force within social relations characterized by power differentials – it contributes to control, constraint, distortion, domination and false consciousness” (Jost and Banaji, 2000, p. 276). This control is not physical. It is implanted on the minds of the people who are stereotyped. Jost and Banaji add, “Those with power can control ideas, beliefs, and stereotypes in the same way they control other social and material resources and can thereby instill a ‘false consciousness’ in the powerless such that the powerless become complicit in their own disadvantage” (Jost and Banaji, 2000, p. 276) The powerless accept their own oppression and become their own oppressors. Cudd points out, “It is not that they [the psychologically oppressed] will prefer oppression to justice, or subordination to equality, rather they will prefer the kinds of social roles that tend to subordinate them, make them less able to choose, or give them fewer choices to make” (Cudd, 2006, p. 181). Psychologists have conducted numerous studies on self-stereotyping. Those who are negatively stereotyped in society internalize the stereotypes and their negative mindset becomes a limiting factor in the ways they conduct their lives. According to research done by Katherine J. Reynolds, et al., stereotyping is a social phenomenon that leads to self-stereotyping (Reynolds et al., 2000, p. 276).

Just about every group suffers or benefits from social stereotypes. These harms and benefits are multi-dimensional. They define every aspect of the group that is stereotyped. I will start with the stereotypes that surround Mexicans in the United States.

Mexicans are often stereotyped as having lots of children, poor, dirty, and involved with gangs and drugs. If they are wealthy, they are believed to be drug-dealers. They are seen as uneducated, though some are hard-working, most are lazy (*Stereotypes in Advertising*). In schools, the Hispanic students are told Hispanics (which include people from Mexico) are bad at math, will only be able to do hard labor; they are told not to worry too much about good grades in high schools because “you won’t be going to college; spend your energy learning a trade so you can get a job”, and so on. The students internalize these expectations of inferiority in the society and often live up to them (voluntary oppression).<sup>5</sup> Naturally many do not nurture their intellectual abilities. They internalize these stereotypes (social expectations of them) and act accordingly. Social stereotypes are a huge determining factor as to what one would expect of one’s life prospects. They do not choose careers or jobs that would lead them to prestigious positions.<sup>6</sup> These harms are seen as an extension of who they are and not the social structure that has made their world such that they are forced to adopt the preferences that they have.

Stereotyping affects a group in different ways. Judith A. Howard points out that stereotypes also affect the way we react to misfortunes of some groups that are negatively stereotyped; “Stereotypes influence our reaction to members of these groups. Those who subscribe to the stereotypes of young black men as aggressive and hostile, for example, may attribute the unemployment of a particular young black man to his presumed hostile disposition, ignoring current economic circumstances” (Howard, 1984, p. 271). Consequently, we see no reason to address the institutional oppression that Black people face but rather we blame them as having a violent culture, which is in opposition to the “civilized and calm” European one. However, stereotyping is harmful in other ways.

According to Claude M. Steele, widespread negative stereotypes against one’s group lead to stereotype threat. He contends, “the existence of such stereotypes means that anything one does or any of the one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one’s own eyes” (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 797). That is those who are negatively (or positively) stereotyped are always under the threat of being watched to see if they indeed conform to the stereotypes. For instance, women often feel as though they live under a microscope. The whole society is watching. Our most

miniscule acts that correspond to the stereotypes further the negative stereotypes against us.

Immediate situational threat is another result of the negative stereotypes against a group. That is the threat of the possibility of being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype. This stereotype threat, according to Steele,

[c]an befall anyone with a group identity about which some negative stereotype exists, and for the person to be threatened in this way he need not even believe the stereotype. He need only know that it stands as a hypothesis about him in situations where the stereotype is relevant (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 797).

Research shows this threat can (and often does) result in poor performance in intellectual tests. Stereotype or situational threat works in different ways in different people. People either internalize inferiority or blame others for their problems and “underutilized available opportunities”, both of which lead to their second-class status (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 797). Self-blame could lead to people seeing themselves as not having the capability to succeed, and so they would not even try. I suppose we all suffer from this to some extent. For instance, I have always wanted to run a marathon. I do not believe that it is within my capabilities to do so. So, I have never tried and probably never will. However, this does not hinder my life-options, my quality of life, nor would it leave me in an oppressed social status. But self-blame could lead to low quality of life. If we blame our lack of success on our own inabilities, it would be difficult to recognize and fight against institutional racism. Self-blame is the final and key ingredient in perpetuating oppression.

The situation seems hopeless but not really. There are ways to overcome oppression in a society and achieve a more egalitarian state but we ought to be committed to challenge the status quo. It takes re-structuring social institutions and the thought processes that support them. As things are, making laws to expect change does not help, although laws do reflect where the society is intending to end up, they do not promote social justice. We ought to act to promote social justice (Pateman, 1985).

## Overcoming Voluntary Oppression

As a political philosopher, I speak of rights. I believe, and it is not a very far-fetched belief, that skin color is used to rationalize all sorts of harms on a group of people. I believe harm is violation of one's capabilities and from human capabilities, comes human rights (Nussbaum, 2000). So, violation of one's development of capabilities is violation of one's rights. Negative self-stereotyping can and often does lead to not attempting to develop one's capabilities (self-oppression). One can have one's rights violated (capabilities destroyed), not only by physical force but also by years of "training." Stereotyping through media, poor education, lack of health care or other services, all in all, leads to one's negative self-image, and is oppressive.

We have the right not to be emotionally or physically violated. Humans are beings with inherent value with full worth and dignity granted to each individual and each individual deserves to live a life free from violence and abuse. Governments ought to protect each citizen's development of capabilities, which lead to human flourishing.<sup>7</sup> That would include the fight against individual's violation of one's own rights. Through self-stereotyping, we can come to believe that we do not have certain capabilities and consequently we do not aim at developing them. If so, then, in my view, we violate our own rights. Governments cannot fight against all kinds of cultural practices, social norms, or even religious practices. However, through adequate education, providing information, one would be less likely to make choices that violate, thwart, or destroy one's own capabilities and hence rights – again a case of voluntary oppression. Most agree that all people deserve to enjoy their rights and have the right not to be unnecessarily harmed. Philosophers disagree on what rights are, where they come from or what rights we have. However, whatever the answer is, they all agree that they ought not be violated.

However, having rights is not enough to overcome the harms that oppression has caused on the mind of the oppressed and those who are doing the oppressing. More needs to be done. Powerful role models such as Martin Luther King set great examples for the people to follow in their fight. Blacks developed a collective identity regardless of their individuality, which made their demands more immediately heard.

The road to ending racism and racial oppression is a bumpy one. Martin Luther King said that people in power will not give up their powers if not challenged (King, 2000, p. 68). More often than not, racial minority leaders do not challenge the system but rather they assimilate to gain access to power. Cudd reminds us collaborating with the oppressors is not resisting oppression. The kind of collaboration with its long-term goals must be considered. Therefore, short-term collaboration might be an essential part of long-term resistance (Cudd, 2006, p. 191-192). However, this is not often the case. Most minorities that have held high government offices create an illusion of equality: one that is comforting to the privileged groups, but dangerous and damaging to the oppressed. A society in the grip of these illusions ignores its very real problems with racism. Consequently, we minimize the horrible conditions under which they live and overlook the social problems that place people in disadvantaged positions. Instead of fixing the system, we ridicule, stereotype and blame the victims.<sup>8</sup>

There are a few things we can do in order to end racial oppression. The harms of segregation, violence, stereotyping, and economic oppression are grave. The situation can be changed but it will require much attention. Big inner city schools are mostly segregated and the students receive a poor education. If we are to overcome the effects of self-stereotyping, it is not enough to stop the social stereotypes. Serious intervention needs to be done in order to get individual's capabilities to develop so all individuals could enjoy their rights. Both gender and racial socialization start at a very young age. We are taught our roles, which to some extent define the way we self identify and realize our abilities or their lack. Therefore, if we are to counter the negative stereotypes in our society, we ought to start with children when they are very young. In order to do this, we ought to take the education of racial minority children seriously and fund their schools better. Education that is based on local economies (local property taxes) might not be enough. It only perpetuates inequalities in capabilities development – poor communities do poorly here, rich communities do much better – what might have to be done is to fully nationalize the distribution of funds for public education. More resources should be allocated to encourage minorities' college attendance.

Our fight to end oppression ought to not only target the future citizens but also the children, or adults who are negatively affected by racism and stereotype threats right now. I suggest, difficult as it might seem, we, as a

society, ought to aim at reversing the stereotypes and reconstruct capabilities that have been damaged. The restoration of undermined capabilities is our critical task here. Groups that aim to empower the oppressed should enjoy public support, not dismissed and labeled “domestic terrorists.” Education is not a panacea, but it remains our most solidly established institutional force for restoration. Black history month is an example of what has been done in order to reverse the stereotypes against Blacks. While this effort is important, I believe it does not have as much power as one might hope, nor do the events have much audience outside of the Black race, mainly because of the very historical or even current segregation it aims to challenge. An educational approach that derived from the oppressed communities and their experience is what is required. Not a “balance” calculated to shelter white sensibilities, but an open pedagogy of the oppressed ought to be developed. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues,

The oppressor elaborates his theory of action without the people, for he stands against them. Nor can the people—as long as they are crushed and oppressed, internalizing the image of the oppressor—construct by themselves the theory of their liberating action. Only in the encounter of the people with the revolutionary leader—in their communion, in their praxis—can this theory [a theory of action] be built (Freire, 2007, p. 183).

Hence, revolutionary minority leaders as well as federal support are essential ingredient to ending oppression.

We must ask what can be done to make people’s motivations independent of their negative racial identity and help people to develop into strong and ambitious individuals? We ought to re-build people’s capabilities that have been destroyed and aim to get everyone to the threshold level of using their capabilities, both mentally and physically. This is not an impossible task. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman explains the psychology behind optimistic and pessimistic attitudes and expectations (Seligman, 1990). These are the attitudes and expectations that can keep people in their oppressive situations. A more positive perception of self would open many possibilities for an individual who might not be there otherwise. I should note that I am not reducing the oppression of racial

minorities to an “attitude problem” but rather, if we are to stop racial oppression, it is critical that we undermine the patterns of thought and feeling that produce voluntary oppression. Reducing oppressive patterns of thoughts would be an obvious first step. Only then will we have a reasonable chance in making progress towards ending the oppression of racial minorities.

## Notes

1. Harvey in her book, *Civilized Oppression*, gives a very interesting discussion of humor as a tool that oppressors use. She reminds us that having a sense of humor is highly prized as a virtue, although in many contexts, for instance where there is a power difference, it is a way of oppressing the one that the joke is about.
2. We can argue that she is victim of “tokenism” which is, according to Suzanne Pharr, “a method of limited access that gives false hope to those left behind and blames them for ‘not making it.’” (*Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*. (California: Chardon Press, 1988). P. 62-63.) She can and does contribute to the oppression of her group. Once we see Rice in one of the highest government officials it gives us appearance of equality in our society and we wonder why all the others (women, Blacks, or Black women) do “not make it”. We then blame them for their failure. (See Lani Roberts, “One Oppression or Many?,” in *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer 1997), p. 45.
3. One might argue that their situation is not due to their race, ethnicity, or even nationality, rather it is due to their poverty. The example will still hold if they are disadvantage due to their nationality or their economic class.
4. This examples parallels Marilyn Frye’s bird-cage example.
5. Many anecdotes from students who graduate from high schools in the Rio Grande Valley area in South Texas do not believe that they can do much with their lives besides finding blue-collar jobs.
6. I do not claim that all Mexicans will end up in disadvantaged positions. However, research shows that widespread negative stereotypes about a

group has a huge impact on the individual members of that group and how they self-identify and hence make decisions based on that identification.

7. We ought not protect those capabilities that violate the liberty principle, although violating others' freedom and liberties might be some individual's idea of a good life.

8. Sandra Van Dyke points out, "following the Reagan and Bush years, American society is back to blaming the victim as an explanation of inequality.... The race problem does not lie in the characteristics of Africans [Blacks], but in the nature of America society." As the quote suggests, blaming a victim happens when people in the disadvantaged positions are held responsible for their misfortunes without looking at the way the situation is structured to keep them in their position. For instance, when a physically abusive man blames the woman for not doing X or Y, which makes him *have to* hit her. This is blaming the victim. For more discussion of *blaming the victim*, see William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, (Vintage Publishers, 1976).

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