

Session 8A: Linking the Oppressions

Learning Objectives:

- To discover in greater depth the linkages of oppressions.
- To explore how the oppressions work to keep all oppressions in place.
- To learn more about the various oppressions.

Session Summary:

This session will encourage people to look at 8 oppressions through common lenses. Issues of dominance and targets, benefits and challenges will be explored. Participants will learn from their own experiences. Issues of assimilation and passing will also be explored to deepen people's analysis of how the oppressions may act out differently in our society.

Background:

This session goes beyond Session #3 of *The Welcoming Congregation*. It might be helpful for some people to review the articles in the *Welcoming Congregation Handbook* that accompany that session (The Common Elements of Oppression, There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions). The words "dominant" and "target groups" are typical words used in anti-oppression training. Occasionally, some people have difficulties with these words, and you are encouraged to acknowledge this but not dwell on it.

"Assimilation" is an important term and concept. It is one of the major ways in which the oppressions play out differently. People of color primarily grow up in families with other people of color. Women usually grow up in households where there are men. B/G/L/T people rarely grow up in homes with other b/g/l/t people. The different situations have different effects on how people within each group act.

Women and b/g/l/t people learn early that they have to get along with the men and heterosexual people to survive—and often there is no escape. In contrast, people of color have churches and homes where they are in the majority—and have safe places from racism. While this is changing it is generally true. The phenomenon of assimilation explains why it is easier for our congregations to be welcoming of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people and women than people of color: The first two groups have no choice but to be with the dominant groups most of the time—and expect to be. People of color do not have to — and often choose not to be with the dominant group.

"Passing" is the ability to be perceived as white or heterosexual or as a man—or to act that way. Often successful women in business act like men. Gay men and lesbians marry into heterosexual relationships. A person of color may act and talk differently around white folks. Some light skin people of color are actually perceived as white. Access to benefits and privileges, and the fear of losing them, often makes people who pass afraid of claiming their identity more fully, either by lying or by saying it is a "non" issue. Often people in the dominant group help to perpetuate assimilation by encouraging people to pass or act more white, heterosexual, and/or manly.

Materials:

1. Newsprint
2. Markers

Preparation:

- On newsprint create the chart below:

Social Group	Dominant Group	Target Group	Name of Oppression
Gender			
Race			
Ethnicity			
Ability			
Religion			
Affectional/ Sexual Orientation			
Class			
Age			

Workshop Plan:

Opening Reading/Hymn (5 minutes)

(You are invited to pick a reading and/or an opening hymn. Singing The Living Tradition is an excellent resource. Other options are a moment of silence, a prayer, or a brief check-in. You are encouraged to also begin with a chalice lighting. Please submit any readings and/or hymn choices that you have used successfully to the OBGLTC as feedback for possible inclusion in future editions of LWC.)

Activities:

Review of Oppressions (10 minutes)

Remind the group that in the *Welcoming Congregation* we examined the relationships between these oppressions as shown on the newsprint (see preparation):

- Gender
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Ability
- Religion
- Affectional/Sexual Orientation
- Class
- Age

Ask the group to help you complete the chart. It should end up looking like this:

Social Group	Dominant Group	Target Group	Name of Oppression
Gender	Men	Women Trans- gender	Sexism
Race	European- American/ White	All others	Racism
Ethnicity	Anglo- Saxon	All others	Ethno- centrism
Ability	Temporarily Able-Bodied	Disabled	Ableism
Religion	Christian	All others	Anti- Semitism (example)
Affectional/ Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian	Hetero- sexism & Homo- phobia
Class	The Top 1-10%	The rest by varying degrees	Classism
Age	Adults 30-50	Elderly, young	Ageism

Take a few moments after the chart is complete to talk about any disagreements people had and why they had them. Inform the group the chart is not exact but rather is designed to give participants the understanding that oppression works to favor a dominant group in a variety of ways.

Dyad Discussions (25 minutes)

Ask the participants to find a partner. In dyads, ask the participants each to share for 1 minute an example they have witnessed of each of the oppressions. This will be a total of 16 shares (8 per person 16 minutes total). Keep time so that the conversations move through all 16 shares.

After the 16 examples have been shared, ask the dyads to talk for 5 minutes about what the examples had in common—or how the different oppressions are alike.

After the five minutes invite everyone back to the whole group to share some of what they learned. What connections did they discover? What did they learn from the conversations? Where do each of them belong to a dominant group and a target group? What did the experience of being in a target group teach them? Being in a dominant group? What did they learn and feel about being in either group?

Benefits and Challenges Lists (40 minutes)

Divide the participants into 2 groups. Hand each group a sheet of newsprint and markers. Ask them to write the 8 oppressions on the piece of newsprint.

Tell each team they are going to have 15 minutes to create a list. Team A will be asked to list the benefits of being in a dominant group. Their challenge will be to come up with at least 5 benefits for being in each of the dominant groups.

Tell Team B they will have 15 minutes to create a list of challenges that people belonging to the target group would experience. Again, they will need to come up with at least 5 challenges for being in each of the target groups.

When the fifteen minutes are up, allow each group five minutes to examine the other team's chart and make any additions they know/think of to the other team's list.

After both teams have made their additions (10 minutes), post both lists on the wall, and ask the participants to come together as a large group.

Discuss these questions:

1. What was the experience like? Hard? Easy?
2. Was it easier to think of benefits or challenges? Why do you think so?
3. Think of one group where you are or have been a part of the target group? Is it easier or harder to make list for that group than others? Why do you think so?
4. What do you notice looking at the lists? How are the benefits and challenges that are listed alike? How are they different?

Conclude by allowing for any final observations and tell participants that this information will be used to help them with the next exercise.

Your Life (15 minutes)

Ask participants to get comfortable and to think of one of the oppressions in which they are in the dominant group (excluding age). If you have someone who only belongs to target groups, then they may pick one of those oppressions. Once everyone has picked an oppression, ask them to imagine their life as if they were in the *target* group of that oppression and to answer the following questions from that perspective.

Let the group know that you are going to ask them a set of questions for them to think about over the next few minutes. They are to answer these questions for themselves, and will not have to share them aloud. Invite participants to get comfortable, and to answer the questions as best they can.

Questions: (Allow about 45 seconds between each question)

- How would your life be different today if you belonged to this group?
- Would you talk differently? Act differently?

- What are some things you might have to think about that you do not have to think about now?
- How would your childhood have been different?
- How would your life at work (or some other place you spend a lot of time now as an adult) be different?
- How would your day be different—would the way a day goes be different for you?
- How would your family be different or how would you be treated differently by your family?
- How would traveling be different—would there be new hazards or problems to think about?
- How would you be treated in church?
- Who would your friends be—would they change or would your friends be different in the way they interact with you?
- Would your life improve?

After the questions are over, give an opportunity for anyone who is comfortable to share their insights and/or thoughts from doing this exercise.

Talk briefly about the last question—despite the oppression that most people in the target groups face, why do you think that people in these groups would choose not to be in the dominant group if they had the ability to do so? Does this mean that we should ignore the oppression that is there?

Ask a final question to everyone: What might you learn about life from the target group perspective that you do not know now? Allow for reflections and questions.

Assimilation and Passing (20 minutes)

Tell the participants that two ways in which oppressions seem to play out differently are in assimilation and passing, the ability to pass and to be viewed as being in the dominant group.

Explain that assimilation is either by choice or without choice becoming like the dominant group. For example: Native American children who were forced to go to white boarding schools with white teachers; African-Americans who choose to straighten their hair; Jews who celebrate Christmas; gay men who distance themselves from acting effeminately; and immigrants who leave their cultural traditions behind.

Ask the participants to think about each of the groups. How much pressure is there for people in the target groups to be like people in the dominant group?

Before people can answer, tell the group you have a couple of questions that may further their thinking before answering this question.

1. Is the person likely to have a majority of other family members who are a part of the same target group?
2. Is the person likely to live in a neighborhood where a majority of other neighbors are of the same target group?
3. Is the person likely to have teachers who belong to the same target group?
4. What role models are visible for people in these target groups?
5. How is this target group portrayed in the movies and on television—if at all?

Go through each of the 8 groups and discuss the original question. (How much pressure is there for people in the target groups to be like people in the dominant group?) As you proceed through the target groups, notice where there are differences and similarities.

Explain to the group that passing is the ability of a person in the target group to be seen and experienced as a member of the dominant group. How can members of the target groups pass—is it easier for some than others? How do the folks who pass benefit? What do they lose? What losses do people in the dominant group experience when people in the target group pass?

In conclusion, ask people to reflect for a moment on something they have learned and come up with a question for self-study during the week. This question could be something like—if I were in a wheelchair, how would I get to work? Or, if I were gay, how would I talk differently to people around me about my life, or if I were a woman and wanted to be successful, what would I have to do?

Thank the participants for their work.

Closing Reading/Hymn (5 minutes)

(You are encouraged to find a suitable one. The difference between the Opening and Closing is that we suggest that one reading and/or one hymn is selected to be used as the closing for all sessions. The Opening may vary from session to session.)

Suggested Hymns

Suggested Readings

Add Your Suggestion

Ask participants to hold hands as they are willing, able, and comfortable.