

Keynote Speech at 2014 SIETAR Japan Conference

Oppression and Privilege: Two Sides of the Same Coin

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ABSTRACT

People all over the world are concerned about issues of justice. Generally, when societal inequalities are discussed, the focus is on how certain groups of people are disadvantaged—discriminated against, mistreated, and oppressed. However, an equally significant aspect is how other groups of people are advantaged—receive unfair and unearned benefits and privileges because of oppression. In this article, oppression and privilege are described as two sides of systems of inequality, both of which are important to understand and address to achieve greater equity. The discussion primarily focuses on the issues and dynamics of social inequality in the United States, however these perspectives may be helpful to people in other countries as they try to analyze and address forms of oppression in their own contexts. I begin by describing how oppression categorizes people by social groups (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, age, ability and others) and then move to showing how groups of people are treated differently based on these categories. I distinguish between prejudice and systems of oppression and describe how oppression operates at different levels in society (individually, institutionally and societally/culturally). Examples of advantages and disadvantages based on social group identity are included and the importance of an intersectional perspective, which recognizes how social identities and forms of oppression interact, is noted. Next, some of the dynamics of privilege and common characteristics of people from advantaged groups are explored. I end by discussing why even people in privileged groups have an investment in creating greater social justice.

Key words: *Privilege, Oppression, Social Justice*

People all over the world are concerned about issues of justice. Generally, when societal inequalities are discussed, the focus is on how certain groups of people are disadvantaged—discriminated against, mistreated, and oppressed. However, an equally significant aspect is how other groups of people are advantaged—receive unfair and unearned benefits and privilege because of oppression. In this article, I describe oppression and privilege as two sides of systems of inequality, both of which are important to understand and address to achieve greater equity. The discussion primarily focuses on issues and dynamics of social inequality in the United States. It is my hope that these perspectives will be helpful to people in other countries as they try to analyze and address forms of oppression in their own contexts. I begin by describing how oppression categorizes people by social groups and then move to showing how groups of people are treated differently in various aspects of society based on these categories. Examples of advantages and disadvantages based on social group identity are included and the importance of an intersectional perspective is noted. Some of the dynamics of privilege and common characteristics of people from advantaged groups are explored. I end by discussing why even people in privileged groups have an investment in creating greater social justice.

Social Identity Groups and Systems of Oppression

Every person is a multi-faceted individual with many kinds of identities (e.g., parent, athlete, artist, teacher, etc.). When examining social justice issues, the focus is on social group identities, or ways people are categorized in a given society based on particular characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, age, nationality, and (dis)ability. In a socially just world, all people, regardless of their particular social identities, would be valued and respected. Everyone would have equitable access to resources and opportunities, be safe (psychologically and physically) and be able to fulfill their potential. However, this is not currently the case. Instead of embracing and appreciating social/cultural differences, social groups get ranked into a hierarchy, with some social identities being seen as better than others.

One way to define oppression is as a system of advantage (privilege) and disadvantage (oppression) based on social group membership. Some groups are advantaged—seen as superior, have greater social power, and receive unearned benefits, while other groups are disadvantaged—seen as inferior, have less social power, and face discrimination and violence. In the US, as in many countries, men, heterosexuals, the dominant racial/ethnic group (whites), wealthier people, the dominant religious group (Christians), native born people, and able-bodied people are the advantaged (or the dominant or privileged) groups, while women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, marginalized racial/ethnic groups, low income and poor people, non-native born people, and people with disabilities are in the disadvantaged (or the subordinated or marginalized) groups. Even though individuals within these social identity groups may have their own particular experiences, examinations of systems of inequality use a social group lens, focusing

on what typically happens for people within these social group categories in a given society.

Intersectionality

Categories based on social groups are further complicated by recognizing that no one is affected or defined by just one social identity; we belong to many social identity groups. Even if people share one social identity, their other social identities may differ. This in turn affects the experiences of the social identity they have in common. For example, not all women are the same or experience being a woman the same way. There is no “essential” woman. Women’s realities may depend on if they are white or black, straight or gay, upper class or poor. This perspective is called intersectionality. Intersectional theory discusses how social identities and forms of oppression simultaneously intersect and interact (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Social categories do not operate in isolation, but mutually shape each other. Everyone has multiple social identities and most people are part of both dominant and subordinated groups (different social statuses). The intersection of different social identities with different social statuses affect one’s degree of advantage and disadvantage. For example, all women encounter sexism, but those experiences may be mitigated if a woman has other advantaged social identities, for example if she is of the dominant racial/ethnic group (e.g., white in the US). However a woman from a subordinated racial or ethnic group, such as a Latina in the U.S., will experience sexism differently than a white woman because her race is also marginalized.

Prejudice and Oppression

One important distinction in understanding systems of inequality is the difference between prejudice and oppression. Prejudices are pre judgments about individuals or groups based on their social identities. People assume that something must be true about a person because of their¹ social group identity without knowing who that person is as an individual. There are often many prejudices and stereotypes about people from subordinated groups. Some examples of stereotypes in the US are that gay men are effeminate and poor people are lazy. There can also be prejudices and stereotypes about people from advantaged groups, such as that wealthy people are greedy and that men are not nurturing. Regardless of whether the belief or attitude reflects a “positive” quality (e.g., Asians are good at math and blacks are good athletes) or a negative one, stereotypes keep people in boxes and do not allow them to be seen for who they truly are. While prejudices are harmful to everyone, when a group has social power-- access to societal resources and decision-making—they can enforce their prejudices on a societal level, which becomes oppression. A shorthand definition is Prejudice + Social Power= Oppression. Advantaged groups have the social power to act on their prejudice. This can take the form of denying people from subordinated groups access to good jobs, housing, education or health care or being more likely to arrest and incarcerate them. People from disadvantaged groups do not have the same access to social power to have a similar impact on people from advantaged groups. From a social justice perspective, it is critical to consider the differences in power between dominant and subordinated groups, even as we try to

eliminate prejudices and stereotypes about all groups.

Socialization

The process of socialization helps maintain systems of oppression(Harro, 2013). Members of a society learn about their own and other social groups, and the ideology, values and norms of the dominant society. Through overt and subtle messages from families, communities, schools, the media, religious and other institutions, members of different social identity groups are taught their roles, how they should act and what is considered appropriate. For instance, little girls are commonly given dolls and boys are given trucks as play toys. People learn the dominant worldview and are reinforced or punished based on whether or not they conform to the dominant cultural beliefs and behaviors. For example, boys who play with dolls or pursue careers associated with women may be teased or ostracized for not being “real men” or assumed to be gay. Generally, this cultural conditioning makes the current reality, with its inequality, seem normal and natural.

Different Levels of Oppression

Oppression is so insidious in part because it operates on different levels—individually, institutionally and societally/culturally. Often discussions of oppression reduce it to individual acts of meanness or discrimination. However, systems of inequality are more pervasive and institutionalized.

The individual level includes both what individuals believe about themselves and how they are treated in interpersonal situations by others. The institutional level entails the policies and practices of various institutions in a society such as education, health care, business, government, housing, the legal system, banking, the media, and the military. The cultural/societal level encompasses the norms, values, and ideology of the dominant culture, which are expressed through the standards of beauty, sex role and communication norms, the holidays that are recognized and celebrated, and what qualities are valued and rewarded in society. People are advantaged and disadvantaged across these different levels. I will first describe how social identity groups are disadvantaged at these various levels before turning to how other groups are advantaged.

Oppression for Disadvantaged Groups

Individual Level

At the individual level, people from disadvantaged groups may encounter interpersonal bias or violence. Individuals from subordinated groups may be called names, referred to in derogatory ways, or physically threatened. They may be shunned in social interactions or overlooked in group settings. For example, gay people are beat up, Jews find swastikas on their houses, and women report that their ideas are ignored in group meetings while men are credited when making the same point. Some oppressive behavior may be intentional, such as knowingly telling an offensive joke. Other times it may reflect unconscious or unintentional bias such as

talking louder to a person in a wheel-chair (who is not hearing impaired) (Sue, 2010). The impact of the behavior, rather than the intent is what is important to consider in order to assess whether or not it was harmful.

People from subordinated groups may internalize the negative messages about their social group from the dominant culture. This process is called “internalized oppression.” Individuals from disadvantaged groups may feel they are somehow inferior or not normal; they may blame themselves for their own disadvantaged situation. For instance, gays may feel they are somehow “sick” for being attracted to someone of the same sex, women may doubt their leadership abilities, and people of color may believe they are not attractive since they do not conform to white beauty norms. Members of subordinated groups may also devalue others in their same social group. Internalized oppression is an effective way to keep people from questioning the status quo and maintaining the current inequitable systems.

Institutional Level

Institutional policies and practices disadvantage groups of people by limiting their access to resources, power, and opportunities. In the U.S., people of color and poor people generally have less access to adequate and quality health care and often attend poorly funded schools that lack appropriate resources (APA, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Black and brown people are more frequently stopped, arrested and given longer sentences in the criminal justice system than white people (The Sentencing Project, 2013). Being able to buy or rent a home is often more difficult for LGBTQ people and people of color due to discrimination (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013; Equal Rights Center, 2014; Michigan Fair Housing Centers, 2007), and most residences are not accessible to people with disabilities. (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2005). The U.S. media is filled with negative or stereotypical images of marginalized groups, including Latinos as drug dealers and old people as silly and incompetent. Some social groups may also be invisible and missing from representation (e.g. people with disabilities). In Japan, foreigners may face discrimination in housing, healthcare and even restaurants (The Asahi Shimbun, 2008). Even though the Japanese mass media has increased the representation on LGBT people, individuals from these groups are often portrayed in overtly stereotypic ways, negatively affecting the attitudes and beliefs of viewers (Kobayashi, 2013). The effort to get more women into the Japanese workforce faces institutional barriers such as the expectations of long work hours for management positions, as well as concerns about job security, pay, adequate benefits and the prospect of promotion for those who are not “regular employees” (Saeki, 2014).

One way oppression at the institutional level is evidenced is by which groups are in positions of leadership and power in various institutions. For example, in the U.S., even though women are over 50% of the population, only 20% of the Congress is women (an all-time high) (Center for American Women in Politics, 2015). Among the Fortune 500 companies (the largest business in the US), fewer than 5% of the CEO’s (Chief Executive Officers) are women, and even fewer of them are people of color (Berman, 2015). In Japan, women are only 10% of the management positions

(NY Times, 2014). Like oppression at the individual level, even if institutions are not intending to be discriminatory, the impact of their policies and practices may still yield those results. While there are certainly examples of individuals from disadvantaged groups who attain positions of power (the US has a black president) it is necessary to look at what is happening for most people from that social group. It is imperative to understand the more common reality for most individuals of that group and to not solely focus on the exceptions.

Societal/Cultural Level

Disadvantage at the societal and cultural levels occurs when people who do not conform to the dominant cultural norms, values and ways of being and as a result are viewed negatively, marginalized and/or adversely affected. For example, in the United States, there is a strong value on individual achievement and the accumulation of money and material goods. Not only are some groups denied opportunities to obtain those valued resources, people who do not or who choose to not pursue these ends are seen as less successful and deficient. Since only Christian holidays, such as Christmas, are observed nationally, other religious groups do not get time off from school or work for their holiday observances and often cannot find the foods required for their observance. People are expected to live in heterosexual nuclear families (mother, father, and children); other family configurations are often viewed as less appropriate or deviant. If people speak with a non-European accent or do not speak Standard English they are seen as less intelligent.

Oppression at these various levels, across numerous institutions create structural barriers to equality. These disadvantages are not just individual examples of interpersonal bias but are deeply embedded, systemic manifestations of inequality. An understanding of these forces is a necessary but insufficient component for fostering social justice.

Privilege for Advantaged Groups

While it is critical to understand how some groups are disadvantaged by individual behaviors, institutional policies, and cultural norms that is only one side of the coin of oppression. The other side of the coin is understanding how some groups are advantaged. Looking at both sides provides a clearer picture of how systemic inequality operates, and uncovers more opportunities to intervene to create change.

Just as people from disadvantaged groups are seen as inferior, people from advantaged groups are seen as superior. Privileged groups establish the societal norms and standards by which other groups are judged. They have greater institutional power and control, and get to set the laws, policies and practices that impact others. Since they are seen as “better than” others, it seems normal and natural that they are in positions of power. It is commonly assumed that they deserve to be there.

Being part of dominant or subordinated groups affects people’s everyday reality. Not only do people from marginalized groups face barriers and mistreatment, people from dominant groups receive privileges—benefits or unearned advantages often de-

nied others. The following chart provides some examples how people may be advantaged and disadvantaged based on their social identities across different forms of oppression.²

DISADVANTAGES (Oppression)

1. I worry about having enough money to pay for food, clothing, housing, education.
2. I cannot openly talk about who I am dating or in love with.
3. I face physical barriers using public buildings and transportation systems.
4. I cannot afford to travel internationally for educational purposes or pleasure.
5. People are less likely to hire me because of my race/ethnicity, disability or gender.
6. I worry about being harassed or attacked because of my gender or sexual orientation.
7. There are few positive images of people from my racial/ethnic group in mainstream society (newspapers, TV, advertising, textbooks).
8. The work that I do is not fairly paid or valued.
9. Because of money, I am limited in where I can study or the kind of job I can take.
10. I need to hide, change or minimize parts of my identity so I won't be mistreated.

ADVANTAGES (Privilege)

1. I (my family) can afford to live in a nice home and have enough money for our needs.
2. I can openly talk about my romantic partner/spouse.
3. I can easily use public buildings and transportation systems.
4. I can afford to travel internationally for educational purposes or pleasure.
5. People do not hesitate to hire me because of my racial/ethnic identity, disability or gender.
6. I do not worry about being harassed or attacked because of my gender or sexual orientation.
7. There are many positive images of people from my racial/ethnic group in mainstream society (newspapers, TV, advertising, textbooks).
8. The work that I do is fairly paid and valued.
9. I am able to study where I want and have a job that I enjoy.
10. I do not need to hide, change, or minimize parts of my identity so I won't be mistreated.

The Complexity of Privilege

Members of advantaged groups receive privileges whether they want them or not. They do not need to believe they are better than or more deserving than others; the system is set up to their advantage. For example, in many studies of unconscious bias, researchers have found that employers will rate a job candidate (with the same resume) as more qualified if they believe the applicant is a male rather than a female, or white rather than black (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Rueben, Sapientza & Zingales, 2014). Doctors will prescribe more thorough testing and more effective medications to a white patient rather than a black patient (all other things being

equal) (Chapman, Katz and Carnes, 2013; Hoberman, 2012). Students rate on-line professors more positively when they believe the teacher is a male rather than a female (MacNell, Discoll & Hunt, 2014). In these and other cases, the applicant, patient or teacher did not have to ask or want to be treated better than others, but that was the outcome. As a result, they are more likely to be hired, get better medical care, and stay employed.

Inequality occurs because some people are disadvantaged *and* because some people are advantaged. Even if someone does not actively discriminate or act *against* individuals from particular social identity groups but provides opportunities and resources *for* individuals from certain social identity groups there will still be an unequal effect. For example, if an employer provides mentoring and professional development opportunities for men, but not women, he is not actively discriminating against women but is promoting the achievement and advancement of men. Similarly, if someone gets job leads from personal relationships with people in high status positions, that acts as an advantage even though no one is actively denying those references or jobs to others.

Privileges can be material as well as psychological. As in the previous examples, privileges can take the form of concrete and tangible benefits—access to better jobs, housing, medical care, education, or legal treatment. Privilege may also manifest as receiving more respect and being seen as more credible or capable. This treatment results in psychological benefits. People from advantaged groups are more likely to develop a positive self-esteem and a sense of possibility, feel freer from worry about being followed or harassed, and generally feel like they belong in most contexts and society at large. Again, it is important to remember that a person's other social identities and social statuses (being part of other dominant or subordinated groups) will affect the degree and experience of privilege for a particular social identity. For instance, white men generally are privileged in the US but white men who are also heterosexual and wealthy have a greater degree of privilege than white men who are gay and/or low income.

Advantages and Disadvantages as Cumulative and Relational

Advantages and disadvantages are cumulative, they are not simply unrelated one-time occurrences. This is one reason why an historical perspective is critical. We cannot understand today's situations without appreciating how the past has shaped the present and continues to shape the future. As an illustration, in the US, not only were black people enslaved, government, housing, and banking policies and practices after World War II denied access to homeownership and bank loans to blacks while providing them for whites. Along with other actions, this allowed white people to buy homes in good neighborhoods that appreciated in value and provided intergenerational wealth and opportunity. Blacks were shut out of those opportunities and thus have significantly less wealth on average than whites (Katznelson, 2006; Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer & Adamson, 2006). Even presently, if a child grows up in a family that is well-educated and financially secure, they are likely to live in a nice neighborhood, get a quality education in school, get into a good college, get a well-paying job, earn a good living etc. A child in the opposite circumstances would

accrue accumulated disadvantages. The perspective of accumulated advantage and disadvantage could also be used to look at the situation of the Birakumin in Japan who have faced a long history of discrimination. Considered outcasts, they have faced residential segregation, economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement that still affects their status and treatment today (Burakumin-History and Cultural-Relations, 2015).

As these various examples illustrate, there is a relationship between the dynamics of being advantaged and disadvantaged—some groups are advantaged *because* other groups are disadvantaged. People from privileged groups often benefit *at the expense of* people from oppressed groups. A male is more likely to be hired or keep his job because women are being denied opportunities or unfairly evaluated. White people have more housing options in part because people of color are being discriminated against in getting a home. Wealthier students have a greater chance of being accepted into a selective college because lower income students are less prepared, less encouraged or less financially able to do so. Oppression and privileged are two sides of the same coin.

Characteristics of Privileged Groups

While all individuals are different and unique, due to cultural conditioning from the dominant culture and experiences of privilege, people from advantaged groups often share some common characteristics. These qualities can make it harder for people from dominant groups to understand their status and the realities of oppression. Recognizing these common attributes can help members of advantaged groups more fully understand their experiences as well as assist individuals in working with people from privileged groups.

People from privileged groups generally lack knowledge of the oppression others face.

Generally, people learn little about people from marginalized groups in school or from the media and when they do, it is often in inaccurate and limited ways. Frequently, there are not close interpersonal relationships between members of dominant and subordinated groups (with the exception of males and females) or if there are, they do not discuss experiences of oppression and privilege. Unless individuals from privileged groups make a conscious effort to learn about and get to know people from disadvantaged groups, and then have honest conversations about the realities of being from a subordinated group, it is unlikely they will develop a meaningful understanding of that form of oppression. Able-bodied people rarely know much about ableism (disability oppression) unless they have a family member with a particular disability or work with that population. Moreover, given the inequality in power, it is often risky for the individuals from the marginalized group to openly share their experiences with people from privileged groups for fear of being discounted or retaliated against in some way. For instance, when people of color raise concerns about racism they may be accused of being oversensitive; women who speak up

about sexist practices at work, may face ostracism or negative work evaluations.

People from privileged groups generally lack an awareness of one's privilege

Not only do people from privileged groups lack an awareness of oppression, they also tend to be unaware of their privilege. In general, privilege is invisible to those individuals who have it. This phenomenon is compared to being a fish in water—it is all around you but you do not see it. Often, privileges are taken for granted; they are just part of “normal” life. People from advantaged groups do not realize that the things, they take for granted are denied to people in other groups. Without knowledge of the experiences of the oppressed group, it is easy to assume that everyone is treated the same way or has access to the same opportunities. For example, able-bodied people do not have to think about how they will get into buildings or use restrooms and heterosexual people do not have to think about if and how they will refer to their romantic partner.

People from privileged groups generally deny or avoid looking at others' oppression and their own privilege.

It is not unusual for people from advantaged groups to resist acknowledging or discussing privilege and oppression. There are a number of reasons why this may occur. One reason is that people do not like to accept that there are systemic inequities. In the US, the dominant narrative is that there is equal opportunity for everyone and that the country is a meritocracy—people get what they deserve. Recognizing that this is not the reality challenges people’s assumptions and worldview. Individuals resist dealing with cognitive dissonance—the conflict between what they currently believe and the new information that puts those beliefs into question. It is easier for people from privilege groups to deny that there is a problem or blame the people who are disadvantaged than to look at how they themselves are complicit in the oppression of others. Accepting that there are systemic inequities makes individuals question if they have benefitted unfairly, if they have truly earned all they have achieved. Additionally, most individuals like to see themselves as good, moral and caring. People often equate being privileged with being a “bad” person, an “oppressor.” They feel blamed or guilty. Realizing the ways people are unfairly mistreated may illicit painful feelings such as anger, guilt, sadness and confusion. Many individuals will try to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Lastly, most people do not feel “privileged.” Even though they may receive advantages based on a particular social identity, they do not experience themselves as more “powerful,” especially if they have other subordinated identities.

People from privileged groups often feel a sense of superiority and entitlement.

When people have been socialized to see their group as better and more normal than other social groups, it is not surprising that they internalize a sense of superiority. Seeing people like themselves in positions of power and in roles of high status fosters this feeling and belief. Disparaging others who are different serves to elevate their own group. A sense of entitlement often accompanies this sense of superiority. Individuals from privileged group feel entitled to good treatment, attention, and the

attainment of things they desire. They feel they deserve to have what they want. This dynamic is evident when men speak over or ignore women's contributions in a group discussion reflecting their (conscious or unconscious) belief that what men have to say is more important than women's comments; or when people in a high status position do not acknowledge or know the name of a lower status worker (reflecting that they themselves are important but the other person is not) or when someone demands that their calls or emails are returned immediately.

The Costs of Oppression and the Benefits of Justice to People from Advantaged Groups

Clearly, there are many ways advantaged groups gain from systems of inequality. So, why would anyone from a dominant group would want to change the system from which they benefit? Just as focusing exclusively on how people are disadvantaged does not provide the full picture for understanding oppression, so too does just focusing on how people from privileged groups benefit from inequality without considering the costs. There are myriad ways that participating in systems of inequality harms individuals from advantaged groups. There are also many benefits to these individuals of creating greater social justice. Let me be clear. I am not equating the experiences of people who are oppressed with the negative effects of oppression on people from dominant groups. They are not the same. However, I think it is important to recognize that social injustice dehumanizes all people (Freire, 1970).

There are numerous costs to people from privileged groups for being part of inequitable societies. (For a full discussion of these costs see Goodman, 2011). Psychological costs involve a loss of mental health and authentic sense of self. People are socialized into limited roles and patterns of behavior, expected to deny emotions and empathy, and often feel fearful of engaging with others who are different. Social costs are reflected in the loss and diminishment of relationships. There is isolation from different people, barriers to authentic relationships, and disconnection from people from one's own privileged group if they act differently than expected. There is also the loss of moral and spiritual integrity. People feel guilt and shame for their unfair advantages and role in perpetuating oppression, and moral ambivalence when faced with doing "the right thing" vs. the social pressures to maintain the status quo. Intellectually, dominant group members do not develop a full range of knowledge either about their own or other people's cultures and histories. There are omissions and distortions in what people learn about current and past realities. Lastly, there are losses related to safety, resources and quality of life. Social inequality leads to violence and unrest, the loss of valuable talents that are undeveloped and underutilized, and the diminished ability to work collectively around common concerns.

Not only are there costs of oppression, there are benefits of social justice. Research has found that the more equally wealth is distributed, the better the health of that society, as indicated by the degree of health and social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; www.equalitytrust.org). The range of problems covers many issues in-

cluding imprisonment, mental health, violence, education, the status of women, and sustainability. More socially justice societies (beyond just economic equality) have less violence, are able to utilize the knowledge, perspectives and abilities of all people to address challenges, and spend less money on services to address the results of inequality.

On a personal level, people who have engaged in a process to unlearn oppressive attitudes, belief and behaviors have experienced this as a transformative, liberating process that infuses their whole life (Goodman, 2011, Ch. 7). They develop greater knowledge and clarity. People gain information and perspectives that offer new lenses for viewing themselves and the world—becoming more conscious, informed and insightful. They have a more enriched life, living with greater meaning and purpose with a broader range of relationships and experiences. Individuals are less fearful and more comfortable and competent in relationships across differences. There is a greater sense of authenticity and humanity as people feel more authentic within themselves, in their relationships and in their lives and can live more according to their values. A deeper understanding of oppression, a clearer sense of themselves, and more diverse relationships builds empowerment, confidence and competence to address social justice issues.

Conclusion

In order to foster social justice and create communities, organizations and societies that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion, people need to understand the systems they are trying to change. Appreciating that oppression involves both disadvantage as well as advantage allows individuals to better see the dynamics at play and consider ways to intervene. Opportunities to engage in change occur when people from privileged groups can acknowledge the costs of oppression as well as the benefits of social justice to themselves personally and to the larger world. Utilizing an intersectional perspective reminds people that most individuals are part of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups and that within any one social group there are people with other privileged and marginalized identities. This lens helps people see the interconnections among forms of oppression and the necessity for and investment in broader social change. We need to continue to challenge systems where people are unfairly disadvantaged as well as unfairly advantaged so that all people can live meaningful and safe lives in a world with love and justice.

NOTES

- 1 I am intentionally using “their” and “they” as singular gender-neutral pronouns.
- 2 These examples were inspired by Peggy McIntosh’s list of white privileges. <http://amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>

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