The Power of Perception: Toward a Model of Cultural Oppression and Liberation

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Oppression is defined and identified as the basis of a considerable range of psychopathology. An exploratory transcultural model of counseling based on oppression is introduced with the goal of serving both oppressed and oppressive clients. Perception, as perspicacity, is the key to this exploratory model. The authors suggest that oppressed persons generally possess a considerable degree of perception of their oppressors even though they may be unaware of it. Research from the literature on depressive realism is used to infer support. Counseling approaches to oppressed persons are introduced including a new approach to cognitive therapy and an emphasis on liberation rather than adjustment. Counseling approaches to oppressors are also discussed based on the rehabilitation of empathy and perception.

Many authors and historians (e.g., Brown, 1970; Douglass, 1845; Miller, 1986, 1991) have observed that the urge to power has a tendency to compromise a person's integrity. Even a cursory study of history (Garraty & Gay, 1981; Roberts, 1995) gives credence to the often-quoted observation by Lord Acton in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In this article, we examine the nature and process of this corruption. Acton's observation is relevant to abusers of power in virtually any aspect of life—from fascists, tyrants, and despots to ruthless executives, abusive parents, and school yard bullies. The urge to power is a significant aspect of human interaction. Russell (1938) argued cogently that the urge to power, whether benign or malevolent, is the primary motivation of human beings. The will to power as the human being's primary urge was also a major theme in Nietzsche's (1901/1967, 1886/1989) philosophy, which in turn was influential on Adler in forming his popular concept of striving for superiority or perfection (Hergenhahn, 1986).

In this article, we explore examples of the misuse of power and further define it in the context of oppression and from a counseling perspective. This involves developing an exploratory model of oppression along with counseling applications aimed at liberation from it. This article also responds to a call from Robinson and Ginter (1999a) to explore "the intersections of race oppression with other oppressions" (p. 3). Our primary purpose is to provide a transcultural clinical focus for the liberation of both oppressors and persons who are oppressed. Liberation is not only defined as the attainment of a state of awareness and understanding that transcends cultural belief systems, mindsets, and contexts, but it is also a state of wisdom and freedom in being, thought, behavior, affect, and relations (see Hanna, Bemak, & Chung, 1999).

Oppression is by no means limited to the domain of politics. To limit it to the domain of politics or any other single factor, such as racism, would be to grossly oversimplify a complex and pervasive phenomenon. Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) noted that oppression could only be fully understood when the understanding of it integrates the domains of both the political and the psychological.

As a phenomenon, oppression has profound implications for counseling and mental health in general (Lord & Dufort, 1996). Jacobs (1994) went a step further and said that oppression is, in reality, the primary source of all psychopathology that does not have its basis in disease, illness, or genetics. Our exploratory model is intended to expand on these ideas. The current multicultural movement acknowledges the existence of oppression but has seldom addressed it as a subject in itself in terms of its mechanisms, process, and clinical approaches. This worldwide phenomenon has affected people in many cultures throughout history.

The population of oppressed persons includes far more than the actual victims of oppressive governments. They range from groups such as ethnic minorities; gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons; women; and persons with disabilities; to victims of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, and at-risk children and adolescents. Oppressors also include a wide range of persons and institutions, which we attempt to show. They include, but are not limited to, physical and sexual abusers, batterers, as well as persons who fit the profiles

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of antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders and other categories of dysfunction in which harm is done to others.

To imply that all minority group members are oppressed is, of course, inaccurate and overstated. Many minority group members are and have been highly successful and productive. Nevertheless, the dominant culture continues to favor White, Eurocentric ways of being, thinking, and acting that may not fit the reality of cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity present in this country (U.S.) or other countries. In addition, it is not an overstatement to say members of these nondominant cultures continue to live in an atmosphere of oppression and make up a disproportionate number of clients who seek counseling.

Perception is the key element of our exploratory model and is thoroughly defined and discussed as a means to liberation. An often overlooked circumstance in the case of an oppressed person or group is that, as a result of having been denied power, wealth, and status, such persons possess an extraordinary degree of perception resulting from the effort to survive under adverse conditions (Miller, 1986). Conversely, when a person or group possesses a disproportionate degree of power, wealth, and status, their perception becomes diminished if the exercise of their power is primarily self-serving and harmful to others. As we show, much of oppression can also be understood as related to empathy and the loss or lack of it.

It is important to mention that in a treatise of this nature, there is the temptation to mention as many oppressed groups as possible. Unfortunately, there are dozens. Indeed, the first author witnessed oppression of many types from Europe and Egypt to China, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Indonesia (see Hanna, 1998). Unfortunately, to mention so many groups would lead to sacrificing the depth of analysis offered by examining one group in detail. Thus, to achieve some depth, many of the examples we mention in this article involve African Americans and their classic history of oppression rooted in slavery, which remains highly relevant to understanding many of their current concerns (Akbar, 1984; Billingsley, 1968; Gay, 1999; Texeira, 1995).

Before presenting this transcultural exploratory model in detail, it is necessary to define and discuss oppression, perception, and other relevant terms. We also briefly discuss depressive realism, and how it affects perception, and include a section on clinical applications.

THE NATURE OF OPPRESSION

Oppression is defined in dictionaries as an unjust, harsh, or cruel exercise of power over another or others. From a psychosocial perspective, the term can be viewed more specifically in the context of abuse or similar mistreatment that leads to psychological distress or emotional pain and suffering. Oppression is commonly found in the context of racism and prejudice (Kleg, 1993; Robinson & Ginter, 1999a), which is often perpetrated in cases in which persons do not conform to the beliefs or expectations that allow inclusion in the dominant group (Goldberg, 1990).

Characteristic of oppressed people in colonized countries and with significant parallels in the developed world is the "culture of silence" described by Freire (1970). Oppressors in the dominant culture define and control oppressed people, their identities, and their roles, attempting to "silence" them through education and other institutions. The voices and concerns of the oppressed, therefore, are conveniently "unheard" by the dominant members of the culture, whose chief expectation of the oppressed group is that they conform.

This insistence on conformity easily leads to the stereotypical thinking so predominant in racist groups (Allport, 1954). Racism and oppression go hand in hand. Of course, racism itself has no biological basis, even though it is very much alive in the distorted beliefs of many dominant cultures (Cameron & Wycoff, 1998; Kleg, 1993). Oppression is also commonly encountered in situations in which one individual is harming another, perhaps in a relationship of employer–employee, husband–wife, parent–child, teacher–student, or brother–sister. Another important aspect of oppression is an irrational sense of entitlement assumed by the oppressive person or group (Watt, 1999). An example of such a sense of entitlement is the specious and absurd notion of "manifest destiny" assumed by the United States in the 1840s with the claim that all land owned by Native Americans was decreed by God to belong to White people (Brown, 1970). What follows is an examination of the modes and types of oppression. By way of definition, oppression comes about in two different modalities: by *force* and by *deprivation*.

Oppression by Force

The first modality can be described as oppression by force, coercion, or duress. It is the act of imposing on another or others an object, label, role, experience, or set of living conditions that is unwanted, needlessly painful, and detracts from physical or psychological well-being. An imposed object, in this context, can be anything from a bullet, a bludgeon, shackles, or fists, to a penis, unhealthy food, or abusive messages designed to cause or sustain pain, low self-efficacy, reduced self-determination, and so forth. Other examples of oppression by force can be demeaning hard labor, degrading job roles, ridicule, and negative media images and messages that foster and maintain distorted beliefs.

Oppression by Deprivation

In the second mode, oppression is the act that deprives another or others of an object, role, experience, or set of living conditions that are desirable and conducive to physical or psychological well-being. It also includes the deprivation of loved ones, respect, or dignity. Neglect is another form of oppression in which a person is deprived of love, care, support, or vital services as well as basic material needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. A person can be deprived of a commodity such as a house or car, or a plot of land in a desirable neighborhood. One can also be deprived of one's

children, parents, friends, freedom, or even one's childhood. The deprivation can also involve a religious or spiritual practice as was the case from 1890 to 1940 when the United States government banned certain practices of the Sioux tribes as subversive (Brown, 1970). Roles and labels can be imposed on persons, but one can also be deprived of them. For example, a minority person can be deprived of jobs that are desirable and be forced to take those that are limited in range and pay due to the dominant majority's overt or covert insistence on the inferiority of that person's culture or race.

These modalities are not mutually exclusive. If oppression by deprivation does not subjugate the members of the subordinate group, the oppressor may escalate to oppression by force. Any number of combinations of force and deprivation may be carried out by an oppressor.

Types of Oppression

Oppression can be manifested in different ways. It can be overt or obvious, or it can be conducted secretly without the oppressed persons knowing that oppression is being perpetrated. It does not have to be vicious. In this context, there are three forms to consider. *Primary oppression* is of the blatant variety directly perpetrated through either or both of the modalities of force or deprivation. *Secondary oppression* occurs when a person does not actively oppress through force or deprivation but benefits from oppression of others by others. A secondary oppressor does not object to others carrying it out and thus gives it tacit approval. Secondary oppressors generally do not consider themselves to be oppressors, usually asserting quite the contrary. *Tertiary oppression* occurs when a member seeks acceptance from the dominant group by "selling out" or abandoning his or her own group. Or it can take place when persons so desire and aspire to the values and status of the oppressive group that they indirectly victimize members of their own group. The tertiary oppressor often defends the actions or values of the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate group. This might also occur through active betrayal of persons in one's own oppressed group (see Brown, 1970) or by discriminating against or condemning those in the subordinate group. Like secondary oppression, this form can take place in a passive fashion. An example of a tertiary oppressor would be what is sometimes referred to colloquially as an "oreo" in African American communities—a person who is deemed to be "Black on the outside but White on the inside."

Mixed Oppression

Of course there are many instances whereby a person displays *mixed oppression*, being both oppressed and oppressive. In such cases, a person can be abused in one role or identity and quite cruel in another (see Reynolds & Pope, 1991). A good example of this is the case of an adolescent sex offender who himself suffered sexual abuse but who then acted it out on others. Another example would be the case of a corporate secretary who is oppressed as a woman but who abuses her children at home. Still another example is the case of a minority person, oppressed by the dominant group, who commits criminal acts against members of his or her own community. (*Author's note:* The subject of ethnocultural identity formation in a multicultural context is important and worthy of study; however, it is beyond the scope of the present work; see Pedersen, 1991; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995.)

In summary, oppression is forcing something that is undesirable or harmful on a person or group; depriving a person or group of something that is needed, wanted, or helpful; or both. To be oppressive, it must also threaten or ruin a person's mental or physical health, well-being, or coping ability. From a global perspective, oppression, either by force or deprivation, is clearly a major source of psychological problems and issues, in general, and leads to depression, anxiety, and some personality disorders (see Jacobs, 1994). Indeed, oppression (as defined in this article) is related in some way or another to most of the problems presented to counselors.

INCLINATIONS OF OPPRESSORS

Even the most cursory study of the behavior of oppressive groups in history indicates an overwhelming interest in the acquisition of power, wealth, and status (Garraty & Gay, 1981). Dominant groups can be more or less cruel, but their interest in power, wealth, and status seems consistent throughout history and across cultures. This was true of the tyrannical Mongolians of Genghis Khan, the Macedonians under Alexander the Great, and the Caesars of ancient Rome (Roberts, 1995). More recently and closer to home, however, oppression in the United States is currently being perpetrated on Latinos, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, gays, lesbians, and other groups (Robinson, 1999; Robinson & Ginter, 1999a, 1999b). Before the twentieth century, dominance was maintained using considerable physical force and violence (Brown, 1970; Douglass, 1845). Such dominance continues today, although much more covertly, in many cases under deceptively benign appearances. The net result, however, is that these same groups are still routinely denied the opportunities for power, wealth, and status commonly available to the oppressive group (e.g., White male privilege; see Kiselica, 1999) that implicitly claims entitlement.

Power is defined in this article, primarily in the context of control, as influence or the outright exertion of force. Like fire, power can be either helpful or harmful, depending on how it is used. Power or control is a primary need of human beings. Survival is impossible without at least some measure of it. Russell (1938) defined power as the "production of intended effects" (p. 25) and presented a persuasive picture of how virtually all human actions are intricately related to its acquisition and exercise. The problem arises, of course, when those intended effects are harmful to the survival of others. The point is that power used with harmful intent without empathy or compassion is oppression.

Wealth, of course, refers to money and various forms of property such as land, stocks, assets, possessions, and other resources. The desirability of wealth, and the crimes committed in its pursuit, is a globally pervasive phenomenon that needs no documentation. *Status* is defined as a person's social position in relation to another or others, usually within some implicit or explicit hierarchy. Status allows a person to expect respect or treatment in accord with that social standing. It can also be viewed as a source of respect or esteem that is required to be given whether or not it is deserved. Historically, many countries have placed status at the center of their social interactions. In India, for example, status was so important that a poor member of the Brahmin or priestly caste was considered more fortunate than a wealthy member of the merchant caste (Naipaul, 1964).

In plain language, status gives "privileged" persons the social sanction to feel "better than" or superior to, and more entitled than those lower on the social scale, regardless of their worthiness. Hanna (1998) noted that this same desire for status is a major factor behind racism and prejudice. Status is little more than a societally enforced meeting of the need for self-esteem. Through holding status, a person or group may claim the right to higher self-esteem and, as a result, feels justified in ridiculing or stereotyping members of other groups. To a large degree, attributing status to one's own group seems to be an attempt to stabilize and bolster one's own claim to power, wealth, and status. It is then much easier to demean other groups. *Thus, in a twisted fashion, racism and prejudice can be driven by an initially healthy need for self-esteem, which then becomes degraded into a perpetually unfulfilled quest to feel better than or superior to others.* The result is that oppressors—through their inclination toward attaining "dizzying heights" of power, wealth, and status— do so by "stepping" on fellow human beings who become downtrodden, deprived, and victimized in the process. But in this process a curious paradox occurs. Oppressors lose something priceless, while the oppressed gain something of great value.

PERCEPTION AS PERSPICACITY AND AWARENESS

At first glance, *perception* seems to be related to psychophysics, attribution theory, or social cognition. As the term is used in this article, those topics are only tangentially related. We are using the term in its less technical sense of observation and awareness. For our purposes, perception has to do with exercising the powers of awareness, specifically, noticing, recognition, and cognizance. In our use of the term, perception is virtually interchangeable with what Sternberg (1986, 1990) called "perspicacity," which can be described as the ability to see beyond appearances, to "see through" situations, or "read between the lines." Sternberg classified this ability as a characteristic of wisdom. Perception in this context is also understood in the phenomenological sense of shedding or suspending preconceived ideas or notions to arrive at the core or essence of a subject, situa-

tion, or relationship (Husserl, 1913/1982; see also Heidegger, 1966, 1927/1996). It also includes the ability to intuitively understand, read, and accurately interpret the environment (Hanna & Ottens, 1995). A perceptive person is aware, possessed of savvy and understanding, and is not easily fooled or deceived.

Persons from oppressed, subordinate groups tend to be more perceptive than those who are in power. Miller (1986) noted that when persons are denied power and status they will often develop their perceptive abilities as one of the few remaining means of coping or surviving. When one is harshly controlled by those who have power and status, it is essential to perceive and recognize the habits, customs, moods, attitudes, and idiosyncrasies of these oppressors to survive. Examples of this are worldwide. The first author directly observed culturally oppressed groups such as the Tamils of Sri Lanka, the Uighurs of northwest China, and the Bataks of Sumatra in Indonesia (see Hanna, 1998). In each case, the oppressed persons gave detailed observations of and insights into the nature of their oppressors, whereas the oppressive groups described the subordinate group in the usual stereotypes, saying that they were "lazy," "dirty," "stupid," and that "they don't care about their children."

In the process of being ill-treated by the oppressor, an individual or group becomes alienated, detached, or withdrawn in a way that may influence them to see the oppressor in a clear, stark, and direct fashion. For example, if a cruel employer considers himself to be a fine, compassionate person, this will be viewed as self-deception by employees who are under his power. Similarly, the battered wife comes to be hypersensitive to the moods and behaviors of her oppressive husband so as to avoid his violence. The child often knows what triggers and how to avoid the abusive alcoholic parent, even though the effort is not always successful. Even in the routine office environment, employees become attuned to and perceptive of the boss's habits, moods, and behaviors, and work within and around them to cope. The boss, on the other hand, has little need for such sensitivity. Such is the corruptive nature of power.

A similar condition develops for many people of mixed racial origins as well as people transplanted from one culture to another, who are never quite accepted. These people, once again, find themselves becoming highly aware of the contradictions and habits of the dominant group. Yet another example is found in the case of some overweight persons in the United States who are not accepted and are even ridiculed by the dominant group. Many of these people develop extraordinary perception of the oppressive group that worships the thin body image and punishes those who cannot achieve it. As can be seen, such deprivation and enforcement has consequences both for those who hold power and those who are denied it.

On a systems level, the profound observations of Frederick Douglass (1845) and Malcolm X (1964) were classic examples of oppressed persons whose perception was threatening to the dominant group. Many Black slaves, under con-

tinual threat of torture, had to be more secretive but were no less observant. The historian, Genovese (1974) pointed out that in their secretive communications with each other, "slaves created symbolic expressions that not only defended them against those [slaveholders] who would denigrate them but also delivered no few direct blows of their own" (p. 583). He also noted that slaves spun insightful folktales and stories of those who "outwitted oppressors and bullies by guile and trickery. In the Brer Rabbit stories, as in the Jamaican Anansi stories, the trickster, so reminiscent of African folklore, appeared everywhere" (p. 582). As part of this process, slaves recognized fundamental differences between themselves and their oppressors. One slave remarked, "Ours is a light hearted race. The sternest and most covetous master cannot frighten or whip the fun out of us" (Genovese, 1974, p. 570). Remarkably, they carried on with an intense sense of community, of which the slaveholders were not aware. The dominant group still has little idea of the mind-set and beliefs held by African Americans today.

Solomon Northup, a free African American who was kidnapped from New York state and sold into brutal and vicious slavery in Louisiana, saw the evils of oppression in a way few can comprehend. His perception was so acute, his psychological understanding so insightful, that long before the era of Freud, Skinner, and Bowen, he offered this clinical analysis of slavery as an institution:

> It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years. (Northup, 1853/1968, pp. 157–158)

Many Native Americans were similarly aware of the ways and means used by the White majority to deprive them of their culture and their land (Brown, 1970). This oppression continues. There are current examples of bitingly accurate perception from radical feminists such as Daly (1973, 1978, 1992), Johnson (1989), and Dworkin (1987); Native Americans such as Lame Deer (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1992), and African Americans such as Asante (1987), hooks (1995), and Kambon (1992).

Such perceptions are not limited to persons who achieve notoriety. Administrative assistants in corporate offices can be far more perceptive than the executives they work under, and minority children in schools routinely report, with great insight, the mechanisms of their biased treatment by teachers and principals. Minority persons have often perceived that race plays a significant though silent role in many situations from job interviews to loan applications. Many African Americans, for example, have reported to the authors that they can perceive racism in a person "within seconds" of their meeting—and that most of the time they are correct. Figure 1 lists the qualities and characteristics associated with membership in dominant and subordinate groups, as well as goals for counseling for members of each group. It is apparent that the model exposes and assumes
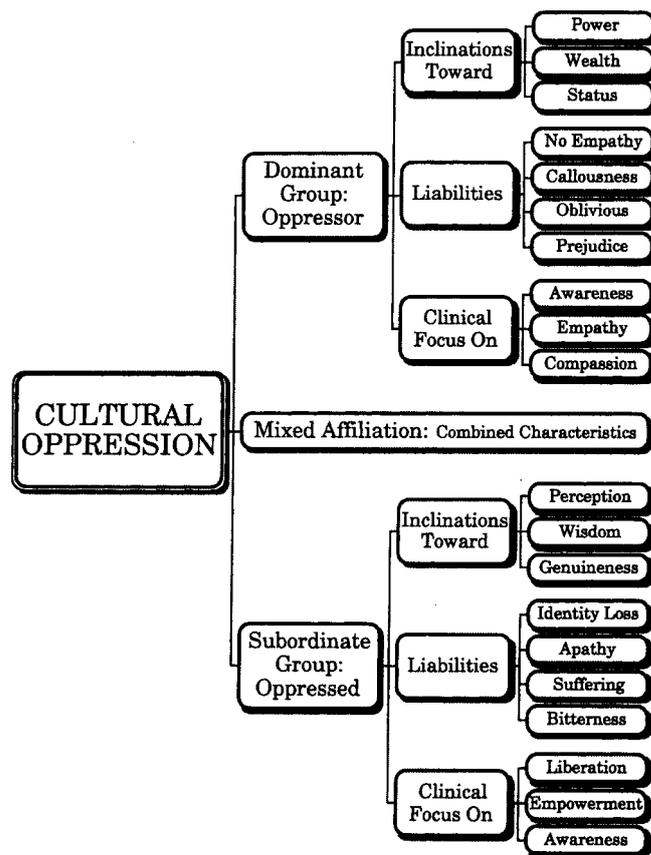

FIGURE 1

Oppression and Perception: Group Characteristics and Membership Liabilities

focal points that are mostly disregarded by the current dominant culture.

In any case, it is no surprise that African Americans, in general, value communication that is direct, to the point, and cuts to the essence of matters and situations (Asante, 1987), free of political spin and similarly obscuring embellishments. Kambon (1992) has noted that African Americans should not be sheltered or protected from their actual perceptions and awareness. When perception is allowed to flourish, persons of oppressed groups tend to become more genuine and authentic. The value of this ability cannot be overemphasized. Perception, as awareness, is one of the vital elements identified by research as a potent factor in therapeutic change (Drozd & Goldfried, 1996; Hanna, 1996b; Hanna & Ritchie, 1995).

Perhaps the ultimate demonstration of an oppressed person with accurate perception is illustrated in the case of the slave woman of the South commonly, and sometimes pejoratively, referred to as the "Mammy." This unfortunate woman was at the heart and center of the plantation system in which she was placed. According to historian Genovese (1974), the Mammy ran the plantation house and was often used

either as the mistress's executive officer or as her de facto superior . . . She served as confidante to the children, the mistress, and even the master. She expected to be consulted on the love affairs and marriages of the white children and might even be consulted on the business affairs of the plantation. (p. 356)

Genovese went on to say that despite her intrinsic pain and suffering as a slave, she was a "tough, worldly-wise, enormously resourceful woman" (p. 356), full of strength of character and dignity, and commanding the respect of master and mistress alike. She and other house slaves were in such proximity to the White masters that they perceived them with full clarity. When observing such issues as alcoholism, immorality, and double standards in their so-called superiors, the slaves could not help but develop a sense of contempt and indignation (Genovese, 1974). This form of contempt and indignation has been recognized for decades by many authors (e.g., Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Griffin, 1959/1977) and continues today.

In summary, perception as perspicacity and awareness develops from being oppressed or outcast and involves heightened awareness of the oppressor's behaviors and attitudes as part of a natural coping process that is intrinsic to survival. An integral part of perception as perspicacity is acquiring a critical sensitivity (see Glauser, 1999; Watt, 1999) to propaganda generated by oppressors. With this, an ability to sense or detect false messages from the oppressive person or group develops as a matter of course.

DEPRESSIVE REALISM

Some may be inclined to believe that oppressed persons, assumed to be downhearted or depressed, would be more likely to perceive things less accurately rather than more so. There is considerable evidence to the contrary. Beck's (1976; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979) cognitive therapy model, for example, declares that persons with depression would be likely to perceive events with an unrealistic, distorted, or pessimistic attitude, to the point of losing rather than gaining objectivity. Ellis's (1971, 1989) rational-emotive model agrees with Beck and his associates in insisting that persons with depression irrationally misinterpret events. However, the findings of Alloy and Abramson (1979) and Alloy, Albright, Abramson, & Dykman (1990) challenged Beck's thesis and found that persons with depression may be more sad but are often more accurate in their perceptions than persons who are not depressed. These findings came to be known in the literature as the "depressive realism hypothesis."

A review of the literature by Alloy and Abramson (1988) led them to conclude that persons with depression are often more accurate in their judgments, whereas persons without depression are likely to make distorted or biased judgments toward being overly optimistic. This directly contradicts one of the main tenets of cognitive therapy and its related schools. In other words, persons without depression are often irrational. Margo, Greenberg, Fisher, and Dewan (1993) also found that persons without depression were more likely than persons with depression to bias and distort their judgments toward being overly optimistic and positive. In other studies, Dobson and Franche (1989) found evidence in favor of the depressive realism hypothesis, as did Ducharme and Bachelor (1993) who found that self-evaluations of social competency by persons with dysphoria—depression accompanied by anxiety—were more in accord with observers' ratings than were those of persons without depression. This also seems the case even with persons who are severely depressed. Of 14 studies comparing persons without depression and those with severe depression, "eight found that the severely depressed subjects' perceptions and judgments were completely unbiased or accurate and another four found severe depressives' inferences to be accurate for some of the experimental tasks or conditions" (Alloy et al., 1990, p. 73).

It should be mentioned that this is a complex and controversial topic and that sweeping generalizations are not wise given other evidence. For example, research indicates that persons with depression are not as accurate in predicting future actions or events as are persons without depression (Dunning & Story, 1991). A review of the literature by Ackerman and DeRubeis (1991) found that although persons with depression can be more accurate in their contingency judgments and perceptions of self–other interactions, their recall of self-evaluative information was less accurate than that of persons without depression. Margo et al. (1993) also found that self-perceptions in persons with depression tend to be negatively biased.

We cite the depressive realism research due to its indirect but important relevance to the oppression model presented here. Not all oppressed persons are depressed, of course. However, this body of research allows the idea that oppressed persons, who are often depressed or dysphoric, may indeed perceive some aspects of life with greater accuracy than do those who are not oppressed. We emphasize that more research needs to be done to confirm the relevance of depressive realism to oppression in the context of oppressed groups, differing ethnic groups, and abused individuals. However, it seems that persons with depression or dysphoria typically do suffer from just the types of oppression (by force, by deprivation, or both) that are defined and described in this article.

LIABILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP IN AN OPPRESSIVE GROUP

Being an oppressor seems to implicitly require that one's own perception of others must be necessarily diminished in order to continue to oppress. More specifically, oppressive persons may find it necessary to dull or diminish their own perception to escape the guilt or remorse that may arise from the recognition that one is hurting others. For example, it can be argued that Mao Zedong was quite perceptive of the oppressive group in the early stages of his revolutionary campaign, until he was corrupted by power, and consequently lost his perception and empathy for his people in the process. A similar explanation could be offered for Joseph Stalin. These two men were highly perceptive until they themselves took power and became the leaders of dominant groups that were

themselves highly oppressive. At that point, their once acute perception of the plight of their peoples was nowhere in evidence as they repeatedly perpetrated acts of destruction and cruelty on the same people they once sought to liberate.

Few oppressors are completely without remorse, and they seem to find it easier to continue their oppression if they are not aware of the harm they are doing. Thus, it is necessary to sacrifice both perception and empathy to maintain gains in power or wealth. This explains the curious phenomenon that occurs in many criminals who consistently insist that they are good, decent people (Samenow, 1998). In a cultural context, the key aspect of this loss of perception and awareness is in the oppressors' loss or lack of empathy toward members of the subordinate or oppressed group. Adler (1956) defined empathy as seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another. If oppressors were to have empathy for their victims, they would themselves feel the degradation or pain that they inflict. Thus, empathy is the "enemy" and the bane of oppressors. If empathy should arise for the oppressed, the oppression process becomes threatened by humane attitudes of compassion and concern. It seems that oppression and empathy are mutually exclusive. We completely agree with Cautela (1996), who noted that helping clients to develop empathy should become a routine aspect of counseling.

Solomon Northup (1853/1968), during his years of bondage, observed how being an oppressor hardens a person, turning men and women alike into callous, cold, and unfeeling persons. This poignant quote summarizes the process of dehumanization in the slaveholders Northup encountered and described in his well-documented and extraordinary book.

> The existence of Slavery in its most cruel form . . . has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of their [the slaveholders'] nature. Daily witnesses of human suffering—listening to the agonizing screeches of the slave—beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash—bitten and torn by dogs—dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin—it cannot otherwise be expected, than that they should become brutified and reckless of human life. (p. 157)

Frankl (1963) and other Jews victimized by the ultimately oppressive Nazi regime made similarly powerful observations concerning the dehumanization process that affects the oppressor. Cautela (1996) referred to the insensitivity of oppressors as "empathy immunization" (p. 341). It is also common in secondary and tertiary oppression. We would prefer to call it "empathy inurement."

A relatively recent example of empathy inurement in secondary oppression can be found in the reporting of the tragic shootings in recent years in schools in Colorado, Arkansas, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Mississippi (Dwyer, 1998; Guerra, 1998; Sleek, 1998). These killings of approximately two dozen school children by school children is both frightening and sobering. But what is glaringly obvious from the viewpoint of oppressed groups is how minority adoles-

cents are killing each other in frequencies far greater than the aforementioned school killings in *each* major American city such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and Miami. This is an example of the loss of perception and empathy at a systems level that comes with participating in secondary oppression.

In the case of tertiary oppression—whereby a member of a subordinate group identifies with an oppressive dominant group at the expense of his or her own culture—perception is lost to the degree that the dominant group is identified with and defended. Perception further diminishes to the degree that the person takes on the cultural mind-set or belief system of the dominant group. Thus, members of minority groups can vehemently disagree with each other over seemingly obvious points, such as the existence of racism itself (see Robinson & Ginter, 1999b). Tertiary oppressors can be highly destructive to the cause of the oppressed group by playing the majority interests.

THE USE OF PROPAGANDA

Miller (1986) observed that when people are deprived of power, wealth, and status, their powers of perception are often developed to a degree so acute that those powers are resented and denied by the oppressor, who becomes threatened by their accuracy. The mechanism of propaganda is an effort to dull or diminish the perception of oppressors by the oppressed. An example of this is "women's intuition," which Miller (1986) claimed is simply accurate perception. The ridicule and devaluation of women's intuition as unreliable, unscientific, and illogical is used to invalidate and detour perception away from the active oppression of women by a dominant patriarchal society. This propaganda can become so effective that some women come to believe that men have a special skill or ability that allows them to succeed in the world that these women themselves do not possess, while, paradoxically, they cater to the needs and foibles of men at home through this same invalidated intuition (Miller, 1986).

In the case of slavery, slave owners often tried unsuccessfully in various ways to convince slaves that slavery was preferable to freedom (Douglass, 1845; Genovese, 1974). Many other propaganda tactics are used by oppressors, including revisionist history and, especially, the enforcement of religious ideology (Garraty & Gay, 1981) as propaganda. Frederick Douglass, clearly seeing the contradictions of religious propaganda used on slaves, said the following:

> Were I again to be reduced to the chains of slavery, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. (p. 79)

In summation, the tragic and disastrous result of oppression is that it leads to the degradation and dehumanization of all concerned. Both oppressors and the oppressed need

to recover their humanity. We know of no other means of doing so than through counseling or some variety of "therapeutic" change.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS TOWARD LIBERATION

From the perspective of oppression, the goal of counseling is liberation (see Ivey, 1995) from the dominant system for both oppressor and oppressed. This requires more than any single theory of counseling can offer. Strupp (1996) wrote that of the hundreds of theories and approaches, from behavioral to family counseling, "It is estimated that perhaps 85% of the outcome variance is attributable to common factors" (p. 1022). The transcultural approach discussed as part of this exploratory model integrates many theories with specific applications for the oppressed and oppressors. Any established technique in counseling can be used to achieve a successful outcome whenever and however it is appropriate for use by the person from that culture or group. However, the techniques mentioned as follows are specifically intended for use in the context of oppression. These can be applied in individual, group, or family counseling settings.

It is not enough to adjust or adapt to a system or a person that is oppressive or harmful. One must be liberated. To merely adjust or adapt is to tacitly agree that the system or person is functional and worth supporting. Thus, liberation (Ivey, 1995) and empowerment (McWhirter, 1991) are vitally important and are reframed in this context toward the development of perception, authenticity, and freedom.

Many exceptional individuals have overcome oppression and become liberated without counseling or other kinds of interventions, and counselors can learn from their example to assist their own clients. What are the characteristics of those who overcome oppression and liberated themselves? What are the commonalties of such luminaries as Martin Luther King Jr., Ghandi, Nelson Mandella, and Betty Friedan? These individuals, regardless of their idiosyncratic backgrounds and personal circumstances, were members of a subordinate group within their own cultures and received the same propaganda messages of oppression. What caused them to question these environmental messages? Clearly, they did not accept nor internalize the dominant culture's evaluation of themselves as subordinate beings.

The first commonality seems to be that each seems to have had a strong sense of self-efficacy and personal identity, elements essential to good mental health (Mruk, 1995). Second, each made a transition from an outer locus of control to an inner locus of control, a key factor in growth and self-actualization (Bandura, 1977). In other words, they did not accept the dominant culture's environmental (outer locus) assessment of themselves. Third, each developed a strong sense of purpose, a mission in life, and set a goal to achieve it. Fourth, each learned to advocate for a class of people. They took it upon themselves to change the system in which they lived. Although they all began their lives in the "conventional" environment of oppression, it seems, for whatever reason, that each experienced their own kind of

transcendence of the cultural mind-set. This transcendence led to a liberation that allowed them to dispute the distorted reality in which they lived and ultimately to go on to become powerfully perceptive social activists. Consequently, counselors can consider cognitive restructuring as key in assisting their oppressed clients.

APPROACHES TO OPPRESSED PERSONS

The same perceptive ability that oppressed people have developed to survive their oppressors is extremely relevant to surviving in other contexts and can be transferred to everyday coping ability. This is the key to empowerment. The problem for many oppressed persons is that they do not know that they possess such perception. Alternately, due to propaganda influence, they may believe that what they perceive is not accurate, that it is unrealistic, or that they are not worthy of their own perception. Once counselors help them to acknowledge their perception and validate it as a skill and ability, persons who are surviving oppressive environments can be quite adept at appraising others. They become more confident of their ability to see through propaganda, abusive messages, and situations, and they become more accepting of the validity of their own perception. The clinical task is, of course, to help the client with the oppression in their history to take that perceptive ability well beyond its original, often painful, origins. This often involves refining and further clarifying extant perceptions.

One approach is cognitive; however, unlike the classical cognitive therapies, this exploratory model seeks to discover the irrational beliefs of the oppressor's mind-set, whether the oppressor is a group or an individual. *In other words, it is not the irrational beliefs of the oppressed person that is the focus but the irrational beliefs of the oppressive person or system to which the oppressed person has agreed*. These beliefs are debilitating and entrapping. Liberation is accomplished by "disidentifying" (see Assagioli, 1965) with those beliefs. This approach has the potential to externalize the problem (see White & Epston, 1990) so that the victim does not feel further blamed, degraded, or burdened by the idea of having internally generated these unsavory ideas. Shedding harmful beliefs also clears the way for positive possible selves to emerge (see Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In practice, oppressed persons will often find that they have agreed with, to varying degrees, the propaganda messages of the oppressor. These messages may be that the victim is stupid, lazy, worthless, and so forth. There is a four-step process that is designed to address and terminate these beliefs. First, it is helpful to list harmful beliefs acquired from the oppressor by asking, "What did [oppressive group or person] want you to believe about yourself." An alternative question is: "When you were or are in the presence of [oppressive group or person] what do you believe about yourself?" The second step asks the client to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, the degree to which he or she agreed with each harmful belief mentioned. The third step involves consciously and actively terminating one's agreement with any

or all of these beliefs. It is best to disagree with the "easiest" first. The final step, if necessary, involves disputing the harmful beliefs as in standard cognitive approaches. There are also variations on this approach. Women and adolescent girls, for example, can do a homework assignment, listing the beliefs about women of the dominant society. This can also be done by listing the dysfunctional messages about women's bodies found in the media. This approach also seems to work well in counseling groups, encouraging group members to process their ratings on the 1 to 10 scale, as well as their disagreements with oppressive messages. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals can do the same regarding sexuality messages they have encountered.

From the affective perspective, it is important to address affects and emotions experienced by victims of oppression, such as rage and shame. This can be combined with the cognitive approach previously outlined. Much of the rage and anger felt by oppressed groups and individuals is often connected to self-abnegation and self-loathing (see, for example, Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990). In this approach, the expression and management of rage is reframed as a purging of the emotions that are largely the result of assenting to or succumbing to the dysfunctional, damaging beliefs that the oppressor wishes to instill in the oppressed. The expression and management of that rage is encouraged without acting it out. This technique seems to have a way of further refining perception. It is a liberating exercise that can be done with members of oppressed groups, victims of rape, child abuse, and so forth, in group, family, or individual settings. In many oppressed persons, particularly with abused women, rage is internalized as depression in a society that tells women they are not allowed to feel anger. The client must first recognize rage for what it is and acknowledge that it is real and valid. It is helpful to use existential counseling (Yalom, 1980) with these clients. The existential approach is particularly useful in multicultural contexts (Vontress, 1988) and is easily combined with cognitive therapy (Ottens & Hanna, 1998).

An adaptation of what Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) called "concentration therapy" can be combined with the aforementioned techniques. This therapy is a kind of exposure or flooding technique that asks the client to hold the image of the oppressive person or group in his or her mind and to report the feelings and thoughts that are then evoked or elicited. These feelings and thoughts can then be processed through standard counseling procedures, including those presented here.

This approach to oppression further develops perception and, with it, wisdom (see Hanna & Ottens, 1995). *Wisdom* is a term that clients can relate to, and this process demonstrates to them that negative life experiences can have a positive outcome in the form of lessons learned. If it is made clear that wisdom is different from other cognitive abilities such as intelligence (Sternberg, 1986, 1990) and that it can result from learning from their oppression, their negative experiences can be reframed as a valuable source of knowledge. Hanna et al. (1999) developed a multicultural counseling approach based on the idea that the effective multicultural counselor is also a wise person. Robinson and Howard-Hamilton (1994) outlined an afrocentric approach to counseling that incorporates both wisdom and perception.

APPROACHES TO PERSONS WHO OPPRESS

There is an abundance of literature on the nature of psychopathology. However, one of the most glaring deficiencies in our current nosology is the lack of a model of mental health (Strupp, 1996). Indeed, most of the measures and standards of mental health are illusory and inadequate (Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). Many would argue, for example, that *racism* is psychopathology and deserves mention in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The mental health professions, not recognizing oppression, typically do not take such pathology into account.

The aforementioned deficiencies might be avoided by adopting Adler's (1956, 1979) simple yet profound model of mental health that is routinely studied by counseling students yet is seldom put into practice. It is based on the notion of *gemeinschaftsgefuhl*, or "community feeling"—that global awareness of, and identification with, all the human race. Unfortunately, this term has been historically mistranslated as "social interest" (see Ansbacher, 1992; Hanna, 1996a). The key to this exploratory model is the development of empathy through counseling to a point where one identifies with and seeks to help virtually all human beings. A prime example of this process is Malcolm X (1964), who started out as a tertiary oppressive drug addict and criminal and rose to the level of an authentic person who sought liberation for the people of his culture. Malcolm recognized and taught that all human beings are part of a global community. The idea of a global community may be taking hold. Bemak and Hanna (1998) noted that it might be a trend for counselors in the twenty-first century.

Although much has been written on developing empathy in counselors, increasing empathy *in clients* is an important point to consider for routine inclusion in counseling applications and training. Although Orlinsky and Howard (1986) noted that the client's degree of empathy is not recognized as criteria in any outcome studies, Cautela (1996) has stated that counseling focused on increasing empathy in clients is vitally important and offered an assessment of it for outcome studies. He especially recommended this approach for perpetrators, or what we would refer to as oppressors. In counseling sex offenders, for example, victim empathy is an important part of treatment (see, for example, O'Donahue & Letourneau, 1993).

To build empathy in an oppressive client, it is vitally necessary to get the person to assume the viewpoint or perspective of his or her victim. This is done at the simplest level by asking how the oppressor's actions and decisions are thought of by others in their environment (Cautela, 1996). The next step involves the use of role plays and the "empty

chair" technique. Through these techniques, the client has the opportunity to assume the role of the victim. Then, as part of processing the experience, the oppressor can be asked how it feels to be that person—what kinds of thoughts and feelings they experienced in that role. This is not easy work, but when the oppressor does indeed recognize the pain of the victim, it is a dramatic and moving experience and the beginning of the rehabilitation of empathy (see Hanna & Hunt, 1999).

Oppressors can also be asked to name someone they admired as a child and then check to see if this person was oppressive. Through the modeling process, children and adolescents often pick models unwisely (Bandura, 1977). We have found that when reviewed, persons can reconsider the influence and value that such persons represented. It is important to list the characteristics of the model. Even though the model has been long absent, the influence can remain strong. Through this process, the oppressor can reduce the influence of oppressive models by performing a cognitive process of critically analyzing the values and beliefs acquired from them and then, most important, acting to consciously "disidentify" from them (see Assagioli, 1965).

As with oppressed persons, an oppressive client can also be asked to outline the mind-set in which he or she grew up. In this case the procedure has an additional component. We have found that in cases in which an oppressor shows little remorse, there was often a tacit but strong belief encountered in childhood that held that having feelings for others was a sign of weakness and the "mark of a fool." We have explored this phenomenon with clients, often pinpointing exact moments in their childhood when they had learned to literally kill or destroy feelings of empathy or compassion for victims. The key to this approach is to ask the client if he or she ever felt bad about hurting others and, if so, at what age. This period of his or her life can then be explored detailing the mechanism used to kill their sense of empathy, in the effort to become a "successful" oppressor. It should be mentioned here that countertransference and projective identifications (see Cashdan, 1988; Ginter & Bonney, 1993) are a common problem when working with oppressors, and we advise that a person be aware of and seek to resolve their own issues as they arise. Oppressive clients are notorious for their ability to upset counselors, but the difference between the effective and merely mediocre counselor is the ability to manage that same countertransference (Van Wagoner, Gelso, Hayes, & Diemer, 1991).

It is important to bear in mind that a person can be oppressed in one context and oppressive in another. This was referred to earlier as "mixed oppression." In such cases, the clinical focus is on whatever identity or role that is being addressed in counseling at that time. It is important to have the client describe the interplay of the roles and identities of oppressor and oppressed in his or her life, allowing the counselor to use the techniques previously described as appropriate.

CONCLUSION

We began this article with the time-honored quotation from Lord Acton: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." From the perspective of this exploratory model, we can speculate that the nature and process of this corruption is due to the loss of two fundamentally human characteristics, perception and empathy. When these are lost, the door is open for the abuse and criminal exploitation of those denied power, but there is a remarkable mechanism of hope built into this process that is seldom recognized.

Oppressed persons need not be seen solely as helpless victims. They often possess a very powerful and admirable ability that develops through their hardship and strife, even though they may not be aware of it. Although their lives become ruled by harsh realities that can be discouraging and depressing, their ticket to liberation and empowerment is through the often raw and penetrating perception that develops out of their painful experience. Counseling oppressed persons toward refining and enhancing that perception can be both liberating and empowering. Conversely, the road to healing for the oppressor is through recovering their lost empathy and awareness.

Freire (1970) both revolutionized the ways education was conceptualized and changed perceptions concerning how students should be taught. He advocated an egalitarian system in which collaboration replaced hierarchical teaching models. So, too, counseling can learn from Freire's model (Ivey, 1995). Although the counseling field has traditionally advocated a collaborative interaction between counselor and client, it was with the advent of the multicultural and feminist era that this was expanded to include a perspective of counseling as composed of colearners. This involves the parties gaining knowledge from each other, each being equally enriched by the other's perceptions, knowledge, and experiences.

The exploratory model presented in this article provides a perspective on oppression that allows for an integrated transcultural approach to counseling that applies to individuals, groups, and cultures. It honors cultural differences while avoiding "color-blindness" (see Constantine, 1999) and insensitivity to prejudice and discrimination. It directly addresses the pain of the oppressed and the interpersonal coldness and callousness of the oppressor. In applying this approach, however, counselors from dominant groups would be wise to remember that many oppressed persons perceive their counselors much more accurately than their counselors perceive them.

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