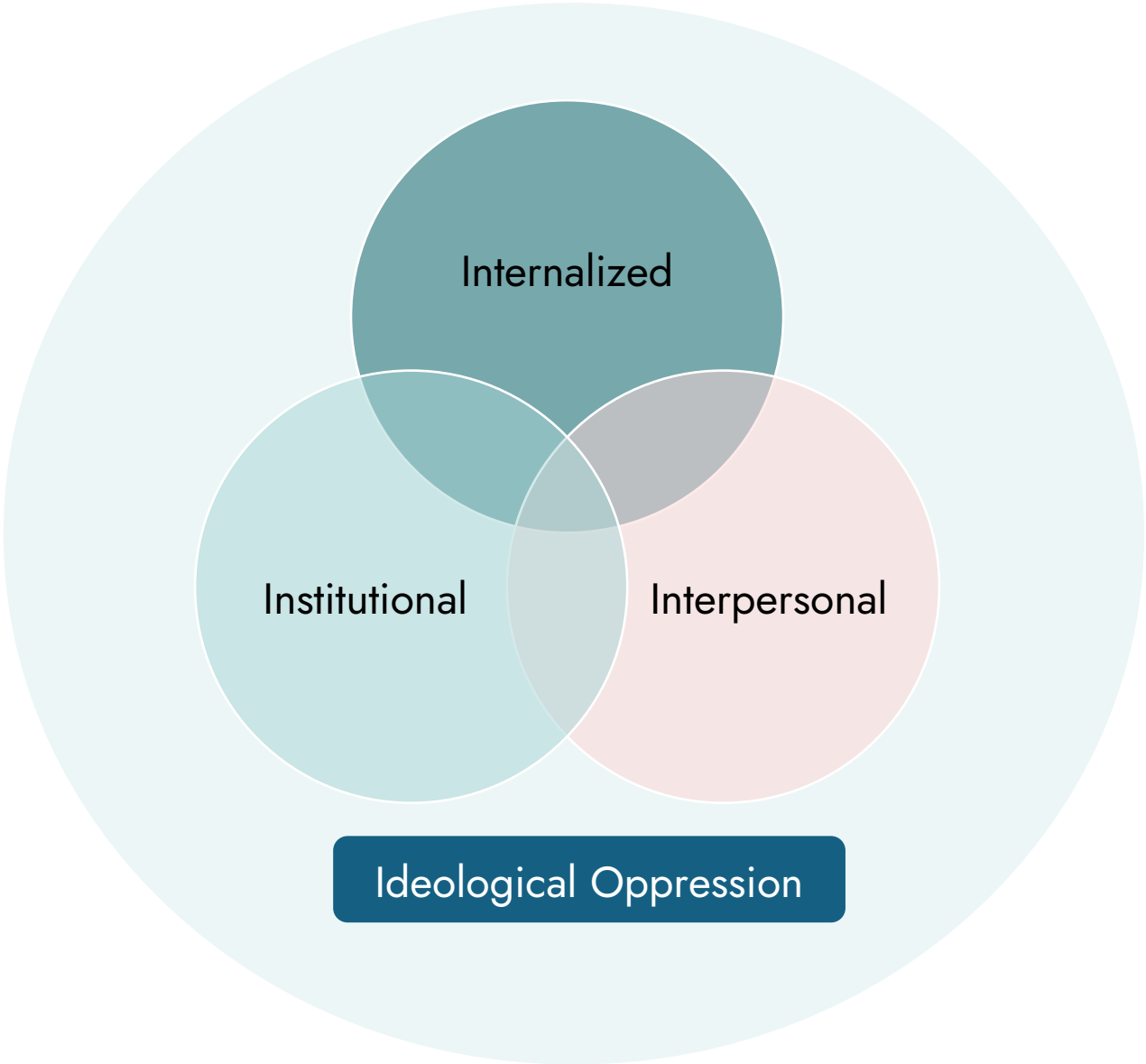
The Four "I"s of Oppression

The Four "I"s of Oppression are a common framework used to illustrate the ways systemic injustices are able to perpetuate in society and over time.

Oppression is the systematic subjugation of a social group by another social group with access to institutional or systemic power. Individuals belonging to the dominant group have access to privilege and benefit at the expense of individuals in the subordinate group.

Oppression manifests itself in four overlapping and interdependent ways; individually as *internalized* oppression; socially as *interpersonal* oppression; it is reinforced through *institutional* oppression; and perpetuates across time and space as *ideological* oppression.



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1. ***Ideological Oppression*** is rooted in value systems that allow people to dehumanize, exploit, or harm other individuals and groups. Because ideology often presents itself as "common sense" or a way of understanding the world, ideological oppression can have longstanding cultural and historical roots. A common feature in many ideological oppressions is biologism–interpreting the value of human life from a strictly biological viewpoint. Ideological biologism might shape how accepting someone is of others with chronic illness, non-traditional family formations, non-binary gender identities, etc. Oppressive ideological value systems do not remain dormant, but express themselves at the individual, interpersonal, and social level through violence, including sexual assault, murder, internment, enslavement, and genocide.

The antidote to ideological oppression is individual and collective action for long term social, political, economic, and cultural change. This includes arts organizing, healing justice, anti-oppression education, reconciliation and decolonizing work, and other systems change.

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2. ***Internalized oppression*** addresses the way individuals absorb belief systems that then contribute to feelings of *false supremacy* or *false deficiency* within themselves in relation to others–especially those who are not part of the dominant social group. In white dominant societies, internalized oppression often expresses itself for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color through a strong drive to over-achieve in order to feel valued, or in self-doubt and hesitancy when pursing opportunities for which they are demonstrably qualified. For white individuals, it can lead them to be unreasonably suspicious of a non-white person's productivity, leadership, or intelligence.

   Internalized oppression can have severe impacts, such as feelings of despair, anxiety, depression, fatalism, self-hatred and even suicide. It can also contribute to entitlement, callousness, gaslighting, cruelty, exploitation, and acts of violence in those who experience feelings of false supremacy.

The antidote to internalized oppression is to participate in liberatory learning—education that accurately accounts for historical injustices and is rooted in anti-oppression values—and collective consciousness raising with accountable self-reflection to identify what beliefs are harming oneself or others. For example, liberatory learning and consciousness raising includes anti-racism trainings, decolonizing work, and engaging histories that center the experiences and viewpoints of oppressed communities. Accountable self-reflection includes meeting in affinity groups that are in partnership with oppressed communities to promote anti-oppression values and practices.

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3. ***Interpersonal oppression*** is the way internalized oppression is expressed between individuals or groups, both intentionally and accidentally. Interpersonal oppression has a wide spectrum of expression, from thoughtless comments ("women aren't decisive leaders") to violence. When expressed across groups, interpersonal oppression can normalize biased behaviors and violence. Such actions seem justified, normal, or reasonable–especially if oppressive values are tacitly or explicitly supported by the group. It is the most identifiable expression of oppression because its impacts are immediate. When someone is a target of interpersonal oppression, they feel diminished, exploited, attacked, and dehumanized; their safety is jeopardized, and their life may even be threatened. Interpersonal oppression can also be expressed between individuals within the same group when members have internalized the values of the oppressor.

   Though members of the dominant group can experience prejudice and even feel their safety is threatened, *this is not a form of oppression or systemic injustice*. These feelings of threat or harm are not enforced by institutional (legal, political, economic) power.

The antidote to unintentionally expressed interpersonal oppression is liberatory learning, consciousness raising, accountability, and transformative justice when there is a commitment to change. Honestly identifying the problematic statement, behavior, or action is a necessary first step. The antidote to interpersonal oppression when there is active hostility or no commitment to change must immediately center the well-being and safety of the targeted victim. Anti-violence and self-defense training, de-escalation, and bystander training can mitigate harm. The long-term antidote for interpersonal oppression requires dedicated collective action to transform the values, practices, and culture of the dominant group.

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4. ***Institutional Oppression*** is the way oppression perpetuates socially through policies, laws, and social practices. One example is the practice among many colleges of requiring a minimum college entrance exam score from successful candidates; numerous studies have demonstrated that scores do not predict academic success and at best reflect class privilege. As a policy and practice, test scores inequitably keep low income—particularly Black, Indigenous, or other people of color—students from accessing educational credentials and related job opportunities. Institutional oppression can operate at the individual organization level or as broadly as governmental policy. Institutional oppression can look like high turnover among non-white staff, censure of cultural practices, forced sterilization, withholding FEMA funds, over-policing, internment camps, and war.

Though committed individuals can choose to act equitably in their institutional or professional roles, the antidote for institutional oppression is transparent, dedicated, and accountable diversity, equity, and inclusion work towards change. That work includes dedicating financial resources, conducting policy audits and making updates, robust whistleblower protections with pathways for accountability and change, liberatory learning and consciousness building for staff, and robust community engagement practices to promote ethical community partnerships.

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Guidance for using this framework:

Oppression impacts everyone; those who perpetuate oppression and experience privilege, and those who are targeted and oppressed. Neither ignorance of harm nor being a member of an impacted constituency make one exempt from perpetuating oppression. Being clear about how oppression operates can help everyone work concretely to dismantle oppressive systems and foster alternatives individually and across society.

- Consider challenges you or your group has experienced collaborating with people from different backgrounds; systemic oppression is likely a contributing factor. Take time considering each of the "I"s and how it is being expressed in a specific challenge. This is especially useful to do in a group discussion. What can you individually and collectively take ownership over to change, what can you communicate more clearly about, and what requests or feedback can you offer others?

- Have you received feedback related to actions perpetuating oppression, is there a request for repair or accommodation? Consider the feedback or request from false supremacy and false deficiency viewpoints in order to better understand the basis for the request, possible causes for resistance, and what actions you must take.

- Interpersonal oppression has the most personal effects, but accountability and change require identifying the root cause of the harm. If you've participated in interpersonal oppression, take time to consider how internalized and ideological oppression are factors, and address them as you work towards healing and change.

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