

Internalized Oppression and Internalized Superiority Presented as a Multicultural Personality Theory

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Abstract: A theoretical model based on established research of internalized oppression (IO), internalized superiority (IS), and their effect on personality formation is presented. IO and IS are discussed as they exist in several different cultures. Included in this theoretical model are the basic precepts prevalent in the works of Freire, Fanon, Glaser, Poupart, Tappan, and David. The rudimentary elements of personality theory are also presented. The manifestation of (IO) and (IS) in communities and personalities is considered as paradigms that exist on a continuum from dominate to finite in individuals and cultures. The development and definitive characteristics of the concepts inherent to IO and IS are discussed and clarified. An approach to ameliorating the threat to society and to our self-concept that are dictums inherent to IO and IS are introduced. The need for a multicultural theory of personality is argued.

Keywords: multicultural psychology, internalized oppression, internalized superiority, personality theory, learning theory, self-concept, and therapy.

I. Introduction

Internalized Oppression and Internalized Superiority as a Multicultural Framework for Personality Theory and Development A multicultural theory of personality based on the concepts of internalized oppression (IO) and internalized superiority (IS) and drawing from existing theories of personality, and grounded theoretical approaches, whereby theory is generated through comparative analysis (Glaser, 1967) is proposed in this paper.

This model presents IO and IS as two distinctive aspects of personality that reflect consistent patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting (Myers, 2014) portraying features that are unique, relatively enduring, and apparent in the internal and external features of a person's character. Consequently, both IO and IS are learned responses in the same way hate and love are conditioned emotional responses (Chance, 2014). These aspects of character influence behavior in different situations (Schultz, 2013) including social speech and one's public image. Personality in this theoretical model is considered to predict what a person will do in a given situation (Mulvey, Terenzio, Hill, Bond, Huygens, Hamerton, Cahill, 2000) and to be a representation of the contact between the person and his/her environment (Rotter and March, 1973).

The presentation of IS and IO as personality dynamics explains many of the ways in which we are all the same and the many ways we are all different. The variance in personality types presented in this theory are juxtaposed between internalized oppression and internalized superiority. These differences exist in diverse venues among highly similar and dissimilar populations, and thus can be considered universal.

The two concepts, IO and IS are so integrally tied to one another and to the overall constellations of how people interact with one another that they are two distinct personality types existing in all group interactions, social situations, ethnicities, and nationalities. Thus, IO and IS are not specific to particular racial, cultural, or gender groups as they have been presented in previous research (Abe, J., 2015; Padilla, L. M., 2001; Poupart, L. M., 2003; Poupart, L. M., 2003; Tappan, M. B., 2006; Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L., 1996) but are specific to any group that has had a superior standing in a community or an inferior standing in a community.

Individuals and groups who have been studied and identified as internally oppressed include all of the stereotypically oppressed groups, e.g., African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jews, colonized people, women, transgenders, and homosexuals (Chen-Hayes, Stuart F., 2000). Groups that have been researched and identified as internally superior are the stereotypically superior groups, e.g., Whites, heterosexuals, the affluent, and men. Yet neither IO or IS are solely and unequally ingrained in particular stereotypical groups. This paper proposes that in all these groups, regardless of personal disposition, there exist individuals who possess internally oppressed traits and individuals who possess internally superior traits to the extent that these traits represent a personality type that is pervasive throughout their characters. Although not establishing these traits as pervasive in a particular character type, Claude Steele's (1995) research on stereotyped threat does establish the existence

of internalized negative mindsets about one's self and others, based on experience. This concept is in line with the existence of IO/IS personality types as a learned precept.

The theory of personality proposed in this paper follows the tenets already established by accepted theories of IO, IS, and personality theory. In evaluating personality types as either internally oppressed or internally superior we see that people who are categorized as internally oppressed or internally superior express consistent patterns of behaviors and thoughts that reflect these beliefs. They are able to adjust their behavior in accordance with the power dynamics that are present in the environment, but the adjustments they are able to make are restricted by their personality orientation as internally oppressed or internally superior.

This orientation exists on a continuum, and is rarely seen in its extreme but it does effect the overt expression of the individual's personality. Consequently, individuals who have a personality type that connote IO or IS in one situation usually display thoughts and behaviors connoting IO or IS, to some degree, in all situations.

There is a biopsychological link between IO and IS that is consistent with Gray's behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS) models. The internally oppressed individual's behavior is sensitive to reward to a greater degree (1987). Applying a neurological approach to the findings regarding IO and IS we see that genetic constraints in the form of behavioral motifs (Brown, Yemini, Grundy, Jucikas, Schafer, 2013) effect the behaviors exhibited by both of these character types.

Fischer, Hout, Jankovski, Lucus, Swindler, & Vos (1996) associate genetic factors with the roles individuals adopt when oppressed. He states that there is something in the environment that triggers the factors that lead to internally oppressed behavior. This is in line with the evocative genotype model proposed by Plomin, DeFries, and Loehlin, (1977). They present genetic factors in terms of genetic adjustments to the environment. Fischer et al. (1996), compares his concept to the position that occupational physicians hold regarding chronic psychosis that arises from chronic exposure to industrial hazards. Consequently, constant exposure to oppressive and demeaning attitudes and treatment would result in internally oppressive thoughts and behaviors.

When we consider social behaviors related to IO or IS, we observe a variety of behaviors associated with each including: deportment, speech, and action. The expression of these behaviors are present regarding IO or IS irrespective of culture, but the shape the behavior takes is subject to cultural constraints. Behaviors and physical characteristics that reflect inferiority or superiority can be required and enforced by cultural mores, customs, and laws. We most often see these carried out in societies prone towards or which act out rituals related to racism, colonialism, sexism, and caste systems.

IO or IS in and of themselves do not constitute mental illnesses. But if taken to extremes the thought processes and behaviors displayed by individuals who have these character types can be disturbing. Additionally, inappropriate or unrestrained behavior such as homicide, depression, and suicide have been seen among internally oppressed individuals (Balis & Postolache, 2008) as has homicide, egotism, or sociopathy been seen among internally superior individuals. This is not to say that disorders found in the DSM 5 such as posttraumatic stress disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, or bipolar disorder are not associated with IO or IS. But what we are more likely to see with IO and IS in their extreme forms are feelings of victimization, hatred of others, self-hate, aggression, apathy, and isolation.

The existence and prevalence of IO has been reliably validated by studies using IO scales to measure it (Bailey, Tamba-Kuii, Chung, Barry, Williams, Wendi, 2011; Pheterson, 1986). The Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS) presents the effects of five-factors on the internalized mindset of African Americans. These include belief in the biased representation of history (BRH), devaluation of the African worldview and motifs (DAW), alteration of physical appearance (APA), and internalization of negative stereotypes (INS) (2011).

Campón, R. R., & Carter, R. T. (2015) have published a scale to measure racial oppression titled The Appropriated Racial Oppression Scale. This scale was devised to measure the IO of several minority and oppressed groups. In their research they found that internalization of oppression constructs can be measured in different oppressed groups by this single instrument.

The paradigm used in this paper when identifying IO and IS as personality types, is based on a psycho-sociocultural model. The concept of using a psycho-sociocultural model is not new to the proposition of theoretical models and research regarding diverse groups (Lee, 2011). This approach is recognized as one that encompasses the varied dimensions of personality theory and the individuals it characterize.

II. Definition of Terms

In defining IO, several characterizations are offered. Williams (2012) defines "internalized oppression as having three defining elements: (a) process (i.e., the individual, societal and group processes through which internalized oppression is instilled, perpetuated, and maintained), (b) state (i.e., the characteristics, thoughts, and feelings that are consistently displayed by subordinant group members when internalized oppression is present

and in operation), and (c) action (i.e., outcomes or patterned behaviors that characterize and/or help to perpetuate both the external dynamics of oppression and its internalized consequences).” In this definition we see many of the basic elements of behavioral theory defined in terms that would be applicable to personality models specifically being used to define IO.

Poupart (2003) defines IO among Native American people as the social enforcement of cultural codes of otherness upon another group to gain their complicity in the dominant group’s assertion of its power. Western cultures have accomplished this through education, religion, and cultural conversion. While Frantz Fanon (1961) refers to IO as psychic alienation, cultural estrangement, and the disruption of the healthy development of the self and one’s community.

Research on IO often refers to the phenomena as including: internalized learned helplessness, depression, alienation, racism and masochism (Abe, 2015; Tappan, 2006; Pyke, K. D., 2010). Common beliefs about the self and their group for IO personalities is that they are less intelligent, less hard-working, genetically inferior to others, and a danger to social norms. These beliefs are not only associated with internalized racial oppression, but are also common to several oppressive ideologies including misogyny, classicism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism, among others. It is the consistency of the same ideologies and behaviors in many oppressive belief systems and the similar evolution of these conceptualizations, such as the acceptance of and acting out by the oppressed of an inferior definition of self that makes internalized oppressive personality types similar. This definition is most often rooted in the historical designations of race, class, and gender as attributes that encompass status definitions. These definitions are abiding over generations. When discussing internally oppressive status the inherent lack of power and existing disenfranchisement is expressed in self-defeating mindsets and behaviors which can be observed in subjugated people throughout the world. These oppressed people are continually bombarded with imagery depicting their inferiority and depicting the superiority of the oppressor with “legitimizing myths” that relegate the oppressed to a predestined position of inferiority (Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L., 1996).

In order to overcome these negative depictions and create a positive self-image Jewish women in the U.S. attempt to work through internalized oppression by fighting to change systems that are immoral, vehement, and unfair (Rosenwasser, 2013). African Americans have used groups like Black Lives Matter to undermine the negative effects of oppression on their life experiences (Westcott, K., 2015). The LGBT community has endorsed and been somewhat successful in using advocacy strategies for individual counseling (Chen-Hayes, Stuart F., 2000). Empowering literature has been crucial to structuring a positive mental image of themselves for oppressed people and is apparent in the writings of African-Americans, Native Americans, Jews, and other oppressed groups (Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L., 1996).

Internalized superiority is also defined as the acceptance and justification of privilege by people who do and have experienced privilege. A prominent example would be the 1998 vote in California passing Proposition 227 that ended bi-lingual education in California (“Bilingual Ed”, 2015). This was especially significant because over 20 percent of the nation’s population and over one-third of the state’s population was, at that time, Hispanic (Cheng, J., 2001). This exemplifies how IO is the flexing of power by a group that possesses unearned social power accorded them through the formal and informal institutions of the society. Individuals who enjoy internalized superiority have entitlements, benefits, and choices bestowed on them solely because of their status. These privileges are taken for granted and may not be consciously experienced. Privilege includes exercising physical, psychological, monetary, and social power over other subordinate groups. Additional incentives such as the garnering of power and privileges one can accrue because of one’s superior status is prevalent among IS individuals.

Internalized superiority results in a belief system that embraces a superior societal definition of self. Its character types perpetuate, consciously and unconsciously, social inequality which includes both personal and group benefits that accrue to themselves. The definition of IS encompasses common beliefs about one’s group and one’s self that proclaim the internalized superior as having superior minds, bodies, and abilities. Adversely, the “others” or minority groups are viewed as inferior and are justifiably disenfranchised and lacking in status and power.

We see the origins and the results of relationships among those that become internally oppressed and their oppressors in the Nazi movement in Germany (1933-1945), Hutu/Tutsi conflict in Rwanda (1995-1994), Democratic Republic of the Congo under Belgian rule (1908-1960), Sarajevo/Herzegovina genocide in Bosnia (1992-1995), and other conflicts involving disproportionate exercises of power. The readily apparent characteristics of internally superior individuals are authoritarian behaviors, chauvinistic beliefs, color-consciousness, values that revolve around owning land, owning large amounts of material goods, owning and/or controlling other people (Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L. 1996). We see these characteristics in groups as disparate as suburban housewives to Ku Klux Klan members. The generational and logistical issues that compose the relationships between oppressed and oppressive groups reflect the nature of IO and IS as existing on a continuum. This is apparent by the examples of the Hutus and Tutsi having intermarried so clear delineations

were difficult, and the Serbs and Croats having lived next to each other in peace for many years without civil disharmony yet being able to war against one another when social constriction barring such aggression collapsed. The proclivity of members of these groups toward IO/IS mindsets lead to their acting on this proclivity once given the opportunity.

The disparate nature of IO and IS and their prevalence in society, reinforces their place among personality models. Lisa M. Poupart (2003) discusses IO among Native Americans in her paper titled "The Familiar Face of Genocide" in which she states, "Individual expressions of internal oppression are affected by individual material situations and experiences. Thus, potentially as many expressions of internal oppressions exist as experiences of oppression."

Laura M. Padilla (2001) discusses how the oppressed group perpetuates and agrees to its own oppression in her research on IO and the Latino population. She states that when a victim experiences a hurt that is not healed, distress patterns emerge whereby the victim engages in some type of harmful behavior. Internalized oppression has been described as the process by which these distress patterns are expressed. Distress patterns are played out in the family and community in what Horney (1937), would call moving against people and the neurotic need to have control and exert power over others; Padilla referred to this characteristic as self-invalidation, self-doubt, isolation, fear, feelings of powerlessness, and despair.

The existence of IO as a dynamic in personality development has been established and empirically supported by Fischer et al. (1996), in their work *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* in the plight of Koreans in Japan. Koreans are in the minority in Japan and have been treated as slave labor. The Koreans are not high achievers in school and/or attend segregated schools. The effect of minority status and oppression becomes evident when we compare Koreans in the United States, where they excel, with Koreans in Japan where they flounder. Fischer et al. similarly discuss the intellectual damage done by minority status to other groups.

III. Why a New Personality Theory?

Most of the accepted personality theories are based on research completed by White males using White subjects, if based on any research at all. Some of the major exceptions are Karen Horney's (1942) work on psychoanalysis, Carol Gilligan's (1982) research on moral development, and Kenneth Clark's (1939) work on racial identification. Many personality theories are not supported by research or not supported by research that would meet the rigors of today's standards as does the research regarding IO and IS.

Sigmund Freud's theoretical models are based almost entirely on a very small, homogenous sample of case studies which are subject to differing interpretations (Allen, 2006). Little had been done by Allport to support many elements of his highly regarded trait theory with experimental research. Consequently, aspects of his theories have been described as including "vague and ill-defined concepts" (Ryckman, 2013). Hergenhahn and Olson (2011) in presenting Erickson's work state that the research is terse describing his theory as based on his own subjective evaluation of development and noting that Erickson himself did not have a background to, nor a desire for, supporting his personality theory empirically.

This paper presents a personality theory founded on decades of research on diverse groups of people using grounded methodology. Grounded approaches derive conclusions using deductive reasoning based on collecting data, analyzing it and drawing conclusion only after using multiple approaches to the data. The IO/IS personality theory elaborates and extends established theories based on the realities of present day societies. Many of these societies, like America, will be primarily composed of groups previously considered as minority groups by 2050 (Mather, M., Pollard, K., & Jacobsen, L.A., 2011). When we look at Europe we see similar demographic patterns developing with societies becoming increasingly international and multicultural. According to the Policy Exchange, a British think tank, citizens, "...from ethnic minority backgrounds will compose nearly a third of the UK's population by 2050." France has had an increase in the number of immigrants from Asia (China, Pakistan and India), sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal, Mali), and from Arab countries in northern Africa since the beginning of the new millennium (Sunak, R., & Rajeswaran, S., 2014).

The theory proposed in this paper reflects the nature of the experiences and beliefs collected from multicultural people, repeatedly analyzed and researched by experts from both dominant and subordinate cultural backgrounds. The personality theory of IO and IS stated in this paper is based on the internal and external processes observed and expressed regarding diverse groups living throughout the world and people who continue to be diasporic.

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