

OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE:  
STRUCTURE, AGENCY,  
TRANSFORMATION

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STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION VOLUME 48

**OPPRESSION AND  
RESISTANCE: STRUCTURE,  
AGENCY,  
TRANSFORMATION**

EDITED BY

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# INTRODUCTION

Oppression and resistance dialectically envelop everyday life, for both the privileged and the oppressed. The disenfranchised live under regimes in which repression ranges from brutal to institutionally subtle. The privileged socially reproduce their rule through ideology that justifies and policy that institutionalizes subjugation. However, rejecting depression, detachment, and disaffection that emerge from surviving ruling-class regimes, many previously dispirited, instead, choose defiance. They engage in subjectivity struggles by crafting critical consciousness and refusing to be dupes to ideology that represents them as inferior. They undertake social struggles demanding policy that dismantles institutional discrimination and that enhances opportunities for learning and achievement. The exploited, as best as they can in regimes of ruling class and white male supremacy, reconstruct their selves and, it is hoped, transform society.

Sociology's foundational concept, social structure, distinguishes the discipline. Agency, however, cannot be disdained or disregarded. Without a concept of agency, sociologists stammer if called upon to explain how the subjugated transform from being obedient to capitalist culture to resisting cultural hegemony; that is to say, how they become motivated to change the meaning, context, and trajectory of their lives. The arc of history does not bend towards justice by itself, as Martin Luther King's life and the Civil Rights movement demonstrated. Social forces, such as the labor process and the market, will, if unregulated or left to ruling-class desire, occasion catastrophe in the vulnerable. Social justice compels purposeful and compassionate agents to shape social forces.

The qualitative studies that comprise this volume, mostly ethnographies from the symbolic interactionist community, present a structure-and-agency perspective, broadly defined, that constitutes the best sociological lens through which to understand oppression and resistance. The authors' research in this volume interrogates various aspects of oppression and resistance, from the personal to the institutional. Some authors explore situations in which the structure of oppression was insurmountable while others illustrate cases in which agency was able to transform either individual or group identity. Notable to this collection, three scholars address indigenous peoples' collective action to resist long-standing state-sponsored subjugation. In organizing the articles, I began with ones in which structures of domination were severe and gradually shifted to ones in which the marginalized succeeded in resisting such structures.

James A. Vela-McConnell's investigation illustrates the overwhelming power of organizational oppression. Drawing on insights from Goffman's concept of



“stigmatization” and “strategic interaction” as well as from the dramaturgical perspective, he examines the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. He reveals how the Church engaged in “information management” to conceal “discrediting information.” Stigmatized organizations act in ways analogous to stigmatized individuals, except that such organizations have “structural resources” far in excess to individuals, allowing them to prevent scandal through secrecy and collaboration. In the process of isolating themselves from the outside world, such organizations become “total institutions,” necessitating herculean efforts to expose the scandal.

Bryant Keith Alexander presents a film autobiography and personal narrative that juxtaposes his experiences of oppression as a “teacher, scholar, and administrator” with those of other African Americans portrayed in major films. He recounts discrimination in higher education and a harrowing encounter outside of academia, both of which exemplify white supremacy. Alexander undergoes essentialism, his status and behavior ignored while the color of his skin manifests itself, through oppressors’ eyes, as all-important.

Jill Taft-Kaufman’s study illustrates one of the most devastating crucibles the self undergoes, its alteration when afflicted by illness and injury. Such trials come to many of us too soon, as they did to her husband. Eventually they come to all of us. Illness and injury disfigure physicality, diminish strength, reconfigure abilities, and cloud identity. Lives, “rituals,” “routines,” and relationships with friends, change. Taft-Kaufman tackles the problem of patients coming to grips with an unrecoverable identity. Through the use of aesthetic strategies and theatre techniques, especially group narrative work, or storytelling, she demonstrates individuals’ capacity for identity transformation. Particularly helpful in this transformation are new definitions of health as various forms of “well-being” and not the absence of “sickness.” Through storytelling, selves regenerate, building the necessary “autonomy” and “collective strength” to continue on in the “journey that remains.” The author delineates aesthetic narrative collaborations as well as a template for storytelling.

Taylor Price and Antony Puddephatt draw on George Herbert Mead’s concept of emergence and Lonnie Athens’s perspective of radical interactionism to portray the structure of domination of “subscription-based journals” in academic publishing. Editors of open access journals are resisting this structure that circumscribes the lives of the creative community in the academy, especially those who have been “marginalized” by “conventional publishing norms.” Based on qualitative interviews, the authors describe the meaning making process within the open access publishing community that centers on resisting “profit motives” and emerging new “structures of power” that dismantle “access barriers” for audiences and contributors.

Laura L. Cochrane’s ethnography exemplifies the importance of structure and agency to resistance. The Senegalese have a long history of developing indigenous community-based organizations dedicated to “collective ownership and work.” They resisted cooperatives “imposed” by the French colonial

administration and Senegal's independent state. Today, as in the past, through epistemological emancipation and a sense of power, the Senegalese articulate their own "faith-based" philosophies and "community-based principles" that help them build community-based organizations to resist neo-liberal models of global development.

Lisa-Jo K. van den Scott's field work focuses on the Inuit of northern Canada's efforts to resist in "subtle forms" "Western cultural paradigms" of time brought on by "hyper-globalization." The dominant group imposes the stigma of lazy, for example, on the Inuit's refusal to submit to Western culture's nine-to-five work regime. The Inuit, a marginalized group, resist Western culture's rational time constraints through the agency of developing their own temporal norms in which "doing time differently" signifies to them and to the dominant group that they are the makers of their own group identity and community, social practices, and values. The Inuit, by taking time for themselves, cultivate solidarity and resist one of the iron cages of rationalization instituted by Western cultural hegemony.

Jillian Crocker's ethnography focuses on how nursing assistants, many of them single mothers, confront the oppressive circumstances of status inequality and a degrading workplace culture. Nursing assistants' "subversions of authority" center on meaning making and enacting power acts that demonstrate that they are neither dupes nor schemers. Through group identity and solidarity, they devise "collaborative" strategies so that they can simultaneously earn a living and negotiate family exigencies. Crocker's study shows that neither structure nor agency alone, but the interaction between the two, provides the best understanding of oppression and resistance.

Jasmine Armstrong and Brandon A. Jackson's research illustrates the importance of agency to combat epistemological imperialism that is embedded in white supremacy. African American males who join black Greek letter fraternities connect with mentors who provide social capital. Mentors cultivate agency through cultural capital, motivate males to transform their identity from one of inferiority to one of competence, and help males redefine academic achievement. Once African Americans realize that resignation conforms to white supremacy's efforts to relegate them to lives of negation, learning transforms into an act of defiance.

Michael's Spivey's study narrates the struggle of the Pee-Dee, a Native American tribe of South Carolina, who since the 1970s, have resisted invisibility and erasure by gaining state recognition as a tribe. The state's denial of tribal identity has had economic and social consequences for the Pee-Dee tribe. Spivey worked with the tribe beginning in 1994. Through the agency of defining and representing themselves, combined with collective action, the Pee-Dee resisted the state's efforts to annihilate their tribal identity; in 2006 the Pee-Dee were granted state recognition.

Gil Richard Musolf  
*Editor*