

## Emotions and Oppression

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As a young nerd in the 1970s, my first hero was Mister Spock. His story as a half-Vulcan living among humans and his struggles for mutual understanding were the only analog I knew to my experience as a half-Black man raised by a white couple in a nearly all-white community. I envied his ability to be seen as different from the folks around him because I was seen as less than the folks around me—like most people on the front lines of desegregation. I also tried to emulate his nearly-perfect ability to suppress his emotions because it wasn't safe to express mine.

I escaped to college, learned more about how oppression operates, and began to actively engage with various social justice movements. Eventually, my inability to effectively deal with my emotions started to wreak havoc in my life, so I got some help and began to connect with and honor my emotions. As I continued to do both social justice and emotional work, I started to see political elements in the emotional work I was doing, and I began working with other men to help them do the same even as I half-jokingly acknowledged that many feminists I knew saw such work as remedial rather than political. This encouraged me to search out others who were combining social justice and emotional work, so I proposed and moderated a number of WisCon panels to explore the issues more.

I also started to develop some tools that could be used in both contexts to help me understand what was happening and help me be a more effective comrade and ally. Some of the discussions I had about these tools led to an invitation to present a workshop about “Practicing Ally Behavior” at the 2015 Women of Color Conference at the University of Oregon, which in turn encouraged me to more cohesively and holistically articulate my thinking about working across difference as a person with unearned privilege. This article represents further thinking to share with the WisCon community for further development.

The first portion of the article outlines human emotions and describes some of the “emotional work” available for people who want to interact with our emotions in an empowered way. The article then briefly defines oppression and provides some guidance on how to engage with the emotions that result from it.

### The Main Emotions

The four main emotions of anger, joy, sadness, and fear are experienced by most animals with a central nervous system. All animals that experience emotions can do so as a

first response to something presently happening, in which case the emotions are referred to as *primary emotions*. Primary anger is a response to a violation such as an intentional injury, primary joy is a response to an improvement such as the arrival of a wanted child, primary sadness is a response to a loss such as the death of a loved one, and primary fear is a response to a threat such as the appearance of a known predator. Such primary emotions keep us alive: they preserve our bodies and push us towards living rather than merely subsisting. When we are present to them, they move us to stand up for ourselves, celebrate our victories, grieve our losses, and protect ourselves. Human beings (and at least some other primates) can also experience primary emotions as a result of empathy with others—an ability that is part of what makes us human and a necessary component of all successful political struggles.

Modern society encourages us to discount, dismiss, or ignore emotions (i.e., to *numb*) because emotions are distracting, unruly, and inconvenient. When we numb, we are better producers: we get to work on time, we work more efficiently, and we stay late without complaint. We are also better consumers: we try to buy joy instead of earning it by making a better world. This is because it's impossible to numb selectively: instead, we numb *everything*, including our awareness of the things to which we are emotionally responding. We are then subject to *secondary emotions*, which arise as a *later* response to a situation. These include anger without a violation, joy without an improvement, sadness without a loss, and fear without a threat. As such, they are more difficult for us to understand, and it is more difficult for us to respond to them appropriately.

### Emotions and the body

Because emotions evolved before self-awareness, they are experienced and live in our bodies regardless of whether they are acknowledged by our minds. They also manifest in our bodies the same way regardless of whether they are primary or secondary emotions. These manifestations are fairly universal and well-understood: anger looks like a frown, joy looks like a smile, sadness looks like crying, and fear looks like a grimace. We quickly learn to mask our emotions, but such buried emotions are always buried alive—and like vampires without garlic, they are always clawing to get out. As a result, both primary and secondary emotions might manifest very differently by the time we are adults.

For example, any emotion can be experienced as a body sensation such as a tingling, burning, tightness, tension, or relaxation. Emotions can also show up as thoughts—even ones that don't seem to be related to what's happening. One way to learn how we personally experience emotions is to replay the last time that we felt them (or should have felt them) in very slow motion. We can do this by asking questions such as “what happened inside me the second before I raised my voice?” and “what happened the second before

that?” This can provide those of us who have anger management issues with some early warning signs to help prevent unwanted behavior, but I recommend the practice of replaying the genesis of all emotions. If we are so numb that we don’t know the emotions we experience, then we can replay the last time that we *might* have felt a primary emotion due to a significant violation, improvement, loss, or threat.

### Handling Our Emotions

Once we have noticed and identified the emotions we experience, we can then address them in an empowered way. When we are violated, we can work to stop the violation. When life improves, we can celebrate. When we have lost something, we can grieve it or work to regain it. When we are threatened, we can work to protect ourselves. We might not always succeed, but the effort—or just the intentional choice not to make the effort—will help us be more balanced and whole. We will also more quickly notice what’s happening around us and respond more proactively.

This will also work when we are experiencing secondary emotions in response to another emotion. That underlying emotion might itself be a secondary emotion, so it’s usually most efficient to look for a violation, improvement, loss, or threat and then respond to whatever is behind the initial primary emotion while honoring the secondary emotions we experience as important signals. Joy can also be an underlying emotion because it requires vulnerability. The vast majority of us who have been hurt while vulnerable might be more comfortable protecting ourselves with anger than experiencing the joy. We might also fear being hurt again or be saddened about our decreased ability to be vulnerable.

### Questioning the Story

Sometimes, we are reacting to a *story* that we are telling ourselves rather than what’s actually happening. This is part of how fiction works and an essential part of being human, but few of us recognize that we are living in a story even though that is a central tenet of many religions. The stories we tell ourselves can be best addressed by looking at them with the kind of critical eye that could show us whether they are necessarily accurate or even useful. We can then revise them—or even replace them with more empowering stories that better reflect the internal and external reality we want to create. There are many ways to do this; a few especially useful questions are as follows:

- What story am I telling myself?
- When did I first encounter this story?
- Who wrote the story, and why?
- What do I get out of telling myself this story?

Who else is helped and/or harmed by this story?  
Where does this story show up in the lives of others?  
How do I know if this is a true story?  
Who benefits when I believe this story?  
How committed am I to this particular story?  
What other stories could I tell myself instead?  
Why not tell myself an empowering story?

### “Feeling Bad”

We are also responding to a story whenever we “feel bad.” This is probably only experienced by other primates, and its natural expression is for us to hang our head or hide our face. I call it a *narrative emotion* because it *only* arises in the presence of a story, and the name helps remind me that I have to identify the story underneath “feeling bad” in order to best address that experience. There are two main stories underneath “feeling bad”: the story that “I *did* something bad” (which results in *guilt*) and the story that “I *am* something bad” (which results in *shame*). Nobody likes to “feel bad,” so it is easy for us to experience secondary emotions as a response to guilt and shame.

Like other secondary emotions, guilt and shame are frequently used to control other people—so it is often useful to question the stories behind them in order to avoid unconsciously following someone else’s moral compass. Guilt can also serve us by helping us notice when we have behaved poorly, in which case the best way to handle it is to stop doing what we “feel bad” about and/or start making amends. In contrast, the best way to handle shame is to talk it out with someone who we trust to help us. This is because shame is essentially a maladaptive and paralyzing compound lie: that there are “bad people” (as distinct from people who behave badly) and that *we* are one of the “bad people.”

### Oppression and (Some of) Its Lies

The lie that there are “bad people” is also part of what’s behind the inequitable distribution of resources in our society. Such resources include but are not limited to money (and everything it can buy), authority (and everything it can command), normalization (and everything it can provide), and the presumption of competency (and everything it can validate). When a society and its institutions systematically deny resources to a specific group through no fault of their own, the denial is an *oppression*, the group denied resources is the *target* of that oppression, and the redirected resources are *unearned privileges* enjoyed by the group *not targeted* by that oppression. This lack of

resources, in turn, creates *inequitable barriers* that are only experienced by those targeted by an oppression.

One of these barriers is that most of us targeted by an oppression start to believe the lie that there is something wrong with the target group that we belong to at a very young age, a self-shame and self-targeting process known as *internalized oppression*. Of course, almost every human being experiences shame, and almost everyone targeted by an oppression has to battle internalized oppression, so *please* don't take on any shame because you experience it!

There are many different forms of oppression and they intersect with each other in the lives of individual people in complex ways, so almost nobody is targeted by all oppressions in every possible way and almost everybody receives some unearned privileges due to the oppression of others. For example, I don't drive a car—so I haven't been targeted by the police for “driving while black” even though Black men frequently experience racism that way. However, my sex (and my mostly cis-gender conforming presentation) mean that I am rarely targeted by sexism or transphobia—so I have had the unearned privilege of not worrying much about my personal safety while going on many long bicycle rides through areas I wasn't familiar with before I left on the ride.

Those who aren't in the target group for an oppression—as most of us are sometime—can also experience shame as a result of that oppression. However, this shame is not only based on the lie that there are “bad people” but also on additional lies of oppression. One of these is the lie that we can and should be wise enough to know all of the unearned privileges that are thrust upon us and powerful enough to decline them, so some of our shame is due to the false notion that we should be more powerful than we really are. Another lie is that we are individually culpable for the oppression of others, despite the fact that oppression occurs at the societal and institutional level—so there are far too many people complicit in any oppression for it to be traced to any one individual.

### Focusing On Behavior

Even when we perpetuate or encourage an oppression—as we all do to some degree, despite our best efforts—it is what we do (or not) that is the problem, rather than who we are. Therefore, it will be far more productive to focus on guilt about our behavior rather than shame about our identity. Please note that a focus on guilt is not some kind of “free pass” for bad behavior: if anything, it's an attempt to address such behavior more directly. A focus on guilt also encourages us to attend to our impacts more than our intentions, because only the impacts matter when we try to alleviate guilt by making the kinds of amends that will matter to those we have hurt.

A focus on behavior also encourages clarity about what's going on. For example, the folks who complain about so-called "white guilt" always seem to deny their culpability for racism in the past rather than acknowledge its impact on the present or take responsibility for the ways they inevitably perpetuate it. Therefore, I prefer the term "white shame"—which reminds me that they may be experiencing secondary anger covering undistinguished shame and provides me with a different set of tools to interact with them. Another objection by such folks is that they haven't *personally* engaged in the most extreme forms of oppressive violence, but a focus on behavior allows us to address the *microaggressions* that create a climate of hostility in the daily lives of those targeted by an oppression.

### Secondary Emotions and Unearned Privilege

Because we are not subject to that climate of hostility when we operate as members of the group not targeted by an oppression, we come into contact with unfairness less frequently and we tend to be less equipped to handle it appropriately. When we have greater access to money, we tend to be less generous. When we enjoy more authority, we tend to have an artificially elevated sense of control. When we are overly normalized, we tend to be less empathetic. When we are presumed to be competent, we falsely believe that our notions are necessarily accurate. These can also combine to help us take our unearned privileges for granted and to forget that the privileges are at least in part unearned—a process called *entitlement*.

When we are operating out of entitlement, we *personalize* our unearned privileges and experience them as an extension of our self—so we can experience secondary anger when our privileges are violated, secondary joy when our privileges are increased or affirmed, secondary sadness when our privileges are lost, and secondary fear when our privileges are threatened. These *entitled emotions* often prompt secondary entitled anger, such as with the so-called "Men's Rights Activists," the folks who complain about the so-called "War on Christmas," and pretty much *everyone* who longs for the so-called "good old days."

An even more problematic form of unearned privilege is the expectation that others will necessarily take care of our emotions for us. Like most work, this emotional labor is disproportionately performed by those targeted by an oppression. This is part of why such secondary emotions on the part of those not targeted by an oppression are so often experienced as unsupportive, or even oppressive, by the targets of that oppression. The targets of such implicit or explicit demands for comfort might then experience primary anger themselves, because their right to prioritize themselves is being violated. This is part of why people targeted by an oppression have become increasingly hostile when asked to give "cookies," or praise to those not targeted by that oppression who happen to have done

anything about it. A more supportive and effective strategy when we are operating as members of a group not targeted by an oppression would be for us to recognize ourselves for the work that we do. This is part of why I see taking care of ourselves as part of the political work specifically available for us when we are acting as members of group(s) not targeted by an oppression, even though such emotional work also directly benefits us personally.

### Primary Emotions and Oppression

When we are targeted by an oppression, we are prevented from getting our needs met, expressing ourselves, and/or moving about in the world. These abilities are enjoyed by animals in a natural environment, and primary anger likely results from such violations. This is also true of the routine violations of oppression, such as when men too easily interrupt women or when Black folks are too closely followed around a store. Such primary anger is particularly threatening to the status quo when we correctly identify the violation, because the only appropriate response is to dismantle the oppressive system itself.

The experience of joy is too often an unearned privilege itself, because it is more difficult for us to enact positive changes in our lives when we are targeted by an oppression. Joy is also threatening to the status quo, because it helps us notice when we are effective at creating a more just world. Therefore, it is especially important to celebrate progress towards a world that is more just, such as reductions in the unearned privileges enjoyed by those not targeted by an oppression as well as reductions in the inequitable barriers faced by those targeted by an oppression.

The inequitable barriers experienced by those in the target group and the resources denied to them because of an oppression also represent genuine losses that may result in primary sadness. It's hard to miss something you never really had, so this sadness is often buried and may well come out as secondary anger. This is because those losses were in turn the result of a violation, so the natural inclination to grieve is much less productive than the urge to regain what was taken away or never even allowed.

Primary fear is also a natural response on the part of those targeted by an oppression. This is because the system of oppression is built on a foundation of implicit and explicit violence—and fear is the emotional response to a threat. This fear is also likely to result in primary anger, because the elevated levels of fear that are the underpinnings of any oppression are a kind of violation in and of themselves.

### Prioritizing the Primary Emotional Responses to Oppression

As outlined earlier, the most productive responses to our emotions require us to recognize and honor our primary emotions rather than our secondary ones. This is also true for the emotional responses to an oppression—especially because the primary emotions are only experienced as a result of being targeted by an oppression. This is not to minimize the secondary emotions experienced as a result of unearned privileges: again, *all* emotions are experienced in the body, and they *all* need to be appropriately addressed. When we are operating as members of the group not targeted by an oppression, we can calmly remind ourselves that our secondary emotional responses are both a manifestation of the oppression itself and a way for us to deny what’s really going on. We may be unable to prevent the redirection of resources towards our group, but we can stop identifying with the oppression by separating our sense of selfhood from our unearned privileges. This will enable us to respond to the fact of those unearned resources in a more realistic way without taking on the shame that so often paralyzes us when trying to dismantle the oppressions that don’t target us.

### In Conclusion

Emotions are one of the things that make us human, and the oppressive system wants us to pretend that we can make them go away. They are truly felt, and there isn’t anything “bad” about the emotions we experience or how they manifest in us. This is also true of the secondary and narrative emotions: we just need to do more work to figure out what’s going on with us so that we can honor the truth about them in an appropriate way. Only when our emotions manifest in our behavior can they become problematic, such as when they move us to inflict direct or indirect violence against others. We then run the risk of actively replicating oppression rather than being merely complicit in it. But when we are present to what’s actually going on, we can allow our primary emotions to guide how we walk in the world. We can also recognize when we emotionally respond to stories such as the lies of oppression and proactively respond to the stories underneath such emotions—and to the storytellers, who might not have our best interests at heart. This is what emotional empowerment looks like, and it is evidence that we are successfully struggling against the oppressive system. As we do our own emotional work, we will become increasingly vulnerable and empathetic towards ourselves and others. We will also become more capable of working across difference and of doing the work of understanding and dismantling oppressive systems effectively.



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