

Fall 2016 NUB Instructor Guide for Block 5a: Structural Inequality

Overview and Objectives

The objective of this block is to introduce students to the concept of structural inequality. Many students believe that inequality/oppression is an individual occurrence and problem—one that can be lessened or eradicated if oppressed people “just stood up for themselves” and if oppressive individuals or groups of people “simply stopped being oppressive” (e.g. sexist, racist, homophobic, etc.). As we know, however, inequality is also created and maintained by various societal institutions. In addition to individuals changing their own oppressive attitudes and behaviors, institutions must also change in order to create lasting and profound social change. In this block, as well as the next one, students will learn that oppression is not only individual/interpersonal but also institutional/systemic—a fact that has far-reaching implications in terms of the reproduction of privilege for various individuals and groups in society.

Peer Mentor Moments

- Peer Mentors should think of personal examples related to the four questions posed in lecture (see Lecture, item #2a-d below). Be prepared to share some of your responses during class.
- Peer Mentors should ask instructors if they are needed to lead the discussion of the second video. If so, watch the 6 minute video and review the questions below.

Highlights

- 2-3 videos on structural inequality; links below and in PPT.
- Block 5a PPT.
- [Special Instructions]

Class Outline (use in conjunction with Block 5a Structural Inequality PPT):

I. Introduction: (1 minute). [Prior to class, open the PPT to the first slide entitled “Learning Objectives.” You do not need to go over the Learning Objectives as students will most likely read them before class starts.] Today’s class picks up where we left off last week in our study of diversity and will cover the learning objectives listed on this PowerPoint slide. So far, we’ve been talking about how racism, sexism, and the like play out on a micro/individual level through microaggressions, unconscious biases, and a failure to recognize the intersectionality of our own or others’ identities. But these inequalities can also be deeply embedded on a macro or structural/institutional level as well. To understand this further, we have to first define “structures” (or “institutions”) and explain how they function. Then we will define “structural inequality” and discuss two related videos that illustrate the concept both historically and in contemporary times.

II. Lecture (12-15 minutes): Go through the slides 2-7 of the PPT. Talking points below and on PPT:

Note: Since this lecture can be dry, you might consider calling on students or asking for volunteers to read the various definitions and examples on the PPT slides. This tactic will keep them engaged and on their toes.

1. **To define structural inequality, we have to first define the term “structures.”** Structures, or **institutions**, are “social organizations that involve established patterns of behavior organized around particular purposes.

They function through social norms (cultural expectations), which [...] are institutionalized and patterned into organizations and sometimes established as rules and/or laws.”¹

2. **According to Shaw and Lee, “Major institutions in our society include the family, marriage, the economy [including business and industry], government and criminal justice systems, religion, education, science, health and medicine, mass media, the military, and sports” (63).** Here we can acknowledge that these structures/institutions are *important* and *powerful* ones in our society; some may be more or less important to us personally but as a whole they are all very important to the fabric of our society. What’s more, these institutions are socializing agents—we learn about ourselves and other people from our families, our schools, our government and criminal justice systems, etc.

As you look at this list of different societal institutions, I want you to think about the following questions: (a) Which of these institutions make you feel good or good about yourself? (b) Which ones make you feel safe, included, or whole? (c) Which of these institutions don’t make you feel good or good about yourself? (d) Which ones don’t make you feel included, safe, or whole? [While students think about these questions, the instructor and peer mentor should give their own personal examples. There won’t be time to hear students’ responses, however. You may want to note that institutions that don’t make one feel good, included, safe, or whole can fail to be oppressive: the NBA, for example, presumably doesn’t make non-basketball fans feel good, included, safe, or whole, but that doesn’t make it oppressive!] After sharing, tell students that their responses to these questions may indicate their varying degrees of privilege and/or inequality in society.

3. **Societal institutions have their own distinct set of rules, ideologies, roles, practices, laws, and resources, which, in turn, are distributed to individuals and groups in society.** This distribution often *creates and maintains* advantage for some and disadvantage for others depending on their social location (i.e. factors gender, gender identity, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, education, etc.).

The distribution can be intentional or unintentional (e.g. established laws vs. company practices that only benefit some workers) and direct or indirect (e.g., raises vs. preferential treatment of a certain gender or race). Returning to the first two points, let’s think about our own discipline/field of study. [Here instructors can briefly mention how their discipline relates to the first two points. Criminal justice instructors, for example, can discuss (or ask for examples) historic and contemporary rules, ideologies, roles, and so forth in law enforcement, the judicial system, and so forth. Alternately, instructors can discuss a more general societal institution that students can relate to, such as marriage/family, media, or sports.]

4. **Combined, all of these societal institutions create a web (or *system*) of advantage/privilege and disadvantage/inequality for different individuals and groups in society.** In other words, institutions create *systems* of privilege and inequality (e.g. race, racism, and white privilege) that are *structural* barriers to equality and inclusiveness. This is known as structural inequality.
5. **Structural inequality thus refers to the *system* of privilege and inequality created and maintained by interlocking societal institutions.** As you may have heard on the news, or will read about in other courses, structural inequality is also referred to as systemic inequality, systematic/institutionalized oppression, or specific subtypes such as structural racism, institutionalized homophobia, or systematic sexism. As all of these

¹ Source: Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, eds. *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 2015, 63.

terms suggest, inequality is embedded *within* and *across* institutions. In other words, the “major institutions in society are interconnected and work to support and maintain one another” (Shaw and Lee 65).

III. Video #1 Debrief/Discussion (6 minutes long; 10 minutes for discussion):

Video #1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW764dXEI_8

Let’s now look at a specific example of structural inequality. Although this is an example of structural inequality from the past, many people are still living with its effects in the present day. This video examines structural inequality (or in this case, structural racism) against African Americans in the housing industry. As you watch the video, listen closely and make a list of the different societal institutions that were responsible for creating and maintaining structural racism in terms of housing segregation and other unfair practices against African Americans. Also, listen closely for the word “institutionalized” and the context in which it is used. [Play the 6 minute video “Race: The House We Live In” located at the URL above and on the PPT.]

Debrief Questions (10 minutes, located on PPT):

1. **According to the video, what institutions worked together to create and maintain structural racism against African Americans in the form of housing segregation and other unfair practices?** Consider making a list of answers on the board. Remind students that all of the institutions working together in these oppressive ways are what makes this a form of “*structural/systemic*” inequality. [Answers include: the government in the form of the Federal Housing Administration as well as other federal programs and banks; business/industry in terms of unfair real estate practices and other discriminatory housing market and private industry practices; the military who made black GIs serve separately and who continued to be perceived as “separate” when they applied for loans and tried to acquire real estate in desired areas; etc.]
2. **What happened as a result of this widespread form of structural racism? Think about both short- and long-term effects and consequences.** After students supply some examples, briefly explain that housing segregation created not only racism but also poverty (or at least wealth inequality) for many black individuals and families; this, in turn, affected other institutions such marriage/family, the economy, education (i.e. where one goes to school and the quality of education one gets often depends on where one lives—a point made in the second video below), and so forth. Tell students that many individuals, families, and communities are still living with the effects of housing discrimination in the present—even as close to home as Buffalo and Rochester. [Answers to the question include: housing segregation, redlining, black families had to rent so could not gain equity or, in the long term, finance their children’s college education, save for retirement, generate wealth for themselves and the next generation, etc.]

IV. Video #2 Debrief/Discussion (6 minutes long; 10 minutes for discussion):

Video #2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_hx30zOi9I

Note: To break things up, you may consider having your Peer Mentor ask this next set of questions. You can also have students discuss with a partner their response to one or more of the questions. This will give all students a chance to answer the questions.

Here’s another video that addresses the topic of race and racism. As you watch this video, make a list of different institutions that are involved in creating and maintaining structural inequality for Black Americans. [Play the 6 minute video “Racism: Is it Over Yet?” located at the URL above and on the PPT.]

Debrief Commentary/Questions (10 minutes, located on PPT):

1. **In this video, Laci Green is in dialogue with what we've been learning and discussing in our diversity unit.** First, she mentions that for most of her life she was “blissfully unaware” that she was white because her race never affected her; in fact, she tells us, her race was a huge benefit that she never knew she had. This is a concept known as **white privilege**, which scholar Peggy McIntosh defines as “an invisible package of unearned assets that [white people] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [they were] meant to remain oblivious.”² Speaking directly to this concept, Green asks “What advantages has white America been given without even realizing it?” If the phrase ‘white privilege’ is making some students defensive, feel free to talk about the “advantages” of being white—but do make sure they are familiar with the concept and its most common name (‘white privilege’).

Green also tells us that she only really understood the individual/interpersonal dimension of racism—racial slurs, hatred, discrimination, the KKK. She then lists off all of the different institutional/structural forms of inequality that are related to race. **What were some examples of structural inequality that she lists? What are some specific institutions that were mentioned or alluded to?** [Answers include: media coverage, politics, housing segregation/redlining, education, jobs, the economy, criminal justice in the form of policing, police brutality, sentencing, mass incarceration, etc.]

2. **According to Green, why is it hard for some white Americans to understand that racism is still a problem today?** [Answers include: because we are only taught the individual/interpersonal dimension of race, because we don't have personal experience with racism, because racism is so deeply entrenched in our societal institutions that it can be hard to see; etc.]
3. **What solutions does Green offer to combat racism? What solutions do you have in general and in terms of our discipline/field of study? For instance, what might be needed in the workplace to increase diversity and lessen potential individual or institutional forms of racism?** [Answers to the first question include: acknowledge racism, acknowledge that the *system* is unfair, and acknowledge that racism is a powerful *institution* that has a long history, one that can't be eradicated overnight. For the second question, get students to think about the importance of intersectionality, recognizing unconscious biases, avoiding microaggressions, and other things covered in this unit. *Feel free to modify the third question to suit your discipline or to address it yourself—for example, what is already being done in the workplace to increase diversity, inclusiveness, and multiculturalism? What might students' future roles be like in these capacities?*]

V. Video #3 Debrief/Discussion (90 seconds long; 3 minutes for discussion):

Note: Depending on how talkative students are after the first two videos, you may not have time to show this video. Skip it if need be. If all time estimations above and below are followed, however, there should be enough time for this video.

Video #3:<http://www.nbcnews.com/video/obama-confederate-flag-is-reminder-of-systemic-oppression-471961155680>

As the caption indicates, this video features President Obama's “push to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina Capitol” on June 26, 2015. [Play the 90 second video located at the URL above and on PPT.]

² Source: Susan Shaw and Janet Lee, eds. *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. 6th ed. New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 2015, 86.

Debrief Questions (3 minutes, located on PPT):

1. **In this video, President Obama declares that “the confederate flag is a reminder of systemic oppression,” which is a synonym for structural inequality. What do you think Obama means by this?** [Pause and see what students have to say.] In other words, which of the institutions listed here [on the PPT slide] came together to create and maintain the *system* of slavery? How? [Here and in the next question, you will learn what students know (or don’t know) about slavery.]
2. *Time permitting.* Which of these institutions were positively affected/advantaged by the *system* of slavery and which ones were negatively affected/disadvantaged by slavery? [Here you can reiterate the point that societal institutions function in ways that create advantage/privilege for some individuals and groups in society and disadvantage/oppression for others.]

VI. Assignment Reminder. For classes that meet twice a week, remind students that the Great Rate Debate Assignment is due next class. Tell them to closely annotate the readings so they can successfully complete the assignment and prepare for class discussion.

VII. Closing thoughts (2 minutes): So what’s the big picture here? Why is understanding structural inequality important? There’s a lot that can be said, but here’s one major thing that I want you to remember. First, as we’ve discussed there is a difference between individual/interpersonal inequality and structural inequality. Oftentimes, we think that inequality—something like sexism or racism or homophobia—can be lessened or eradicated if oppressed people “just stood up for themselves” and if oppressive individuals or groups of people “simply stopped being oppressive” (e.g. sexist, racist, homophobic, etc.). As we’ve learned today, however, inequality is also created and maintained by various societal institutions. In fact, it can be so deeply entrenched that it can be hard to see let alone understand. In addition to individuals changing their own oppressive attitudes and behaviors, institutions must also change in order to create lasting and profound social change. And that’s where you come in: you can (and perhaps already are) be part of the change on both individual and institutional levels. Think of the roles that you already play in life, as well as the ones that you will play in the future, as students, friends, parents, bosses, employees, community and church leaders, teachers, social workers, police officers, doctors, nurses, and so forth. And that’s the funny thing about institutions...as big and important and powerful as they are...they are still run by human beings and we are the ones, like many social justice leaders before us, who can make further change.

Special Instructions

General Population: Gratitude Journaling! Students should list 5 things they are grateful for in the Journal section of the planner at the back of the planner, just one sentence about each thing.

Meditation Cohort: Open and close the class with the two meditation exercises sent to you by email.

Gratitude Journaling Cohort: Gratitude Journaling! Students should list 5 things they are grateful for in the Journal section of the planner at the back of the planner, just one sentence about each thing.

Alcohol Journaling Cohort: No journaling: follow the general Instructor’s Guide above.

Control Cohort: No journaling: follow the general Instructor’s Guide above.