

# **We want to meet each other as equals, but something gets in the way**

Modern and Internalized Oppression:  
patterns of inequality between native Germans and Immigrants

written by Cooper Thompson, [www.cooper-thompson.com/essays](http://www.cooper-thompson.com/essays)  
concept developed by Valerie Batts and VISIONS, [www.visions-inc.org](http://www.visions-inc.org)  
*Published in Nürnberg interkulturell, die Zeitung des Integrationsrates, June 2013*

The model of *Modern and Internalized Oppression* comes from my colleagues at VISIONS in the United States. It was first used to describe patterns of racism between white people and people of color (people with African, Asian, Latin, and Native American heritage). Over the years, we expanded this model to include other forms of oppression, like sexism, classism, ageism, and homophobia.

*Modern oppression* describes the unintentional and subtle ways that members of a majority or dominant group maintain their economic and political power, and believe they are “superior”, even as they decide that discrimination is illegal and say that they believe in equality. *Internalized oppression* describes how members of a minority or subordinate group don’t use the power and potential they have, and believe that they are “inferior.”

When majority or dominant groups intentionally use their power and resources to keep minority groups in a subordinate position, we call this *old fashioned oppression*.

When a country, state or city decides that *old fashioned oppression* is not acceptable, it is likely that *modern and internalized oppression* will emerge, because people’s beliefs about superiority and inferiority do not change quickly. A government can pass laws that control people’s behavior, but laws cannot control what people think or feel. So achieving equality in a society can take generations.

In this essay, I am using this model of modern and internalized oppression to analyze oppression in Germany based on national origin: the power relationships between native Germans and Immigrants or Foreigners in Germany. Oppression based on national origin can include other forms of oppression, for example, racism and religious oppression, depending on where an immigrant comes from, and assumptions made in Germany about his or her religious beliefs. The model could also be used to analyze other forms of oppression in Germany, for example, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc. I have chosen oppression based on national origin because of my own experience as an immigrant to Germany.

I have lived in Germany since 2003. I have witnessed old fashioned oppression of immigrants: Germans who believe that there are too many foreigners, believe that foreigners cause a variety of problems in Germany, and want them to go back to their

home country. There are some immigrants who believe this, too, that certain types of immigrants countries don't belong in Germany.

Even among the people who want equality between immigrants and native Germans, and who believe that a future Germany needs immigrants, I have experienced clear patterns of inequality. I believe that the model of Modern and Internalized Oppression can help explain this inequality and offer some solutions. In the following pages, I will explain the model and give examples. But first I want to offer a few comments about using the model in Germany.

Some of the words I use to describe groups and behaviors are awkward and not precise, for example, "native Germans" and "immigrants". I use these words for simplicity, because most readers will understand what the words mean, even though they are problematic. Dividing everyone who lives in Germany into two groups – Germans and foreigners -- is overly simplistic. Of course there are differences within each of these two groups. Religion, education, class, skin color, ethnicity, gender, and other factors influence how people are treated in Germany.

Nevertheless, the division of people into two groups based on immigrant background is useful: I believe it is an accurate description of the current situation in Germany. In day to day life, you are either German or a foreigner. There are people with an immigrant background who were born here, have a German passport, and speak like a native, who are not considered German.

The word "integration" is problematic for many immigrants; in practice, it often means assimilation. I use the word here because it is commonly used in this society to talk about the process of immigrants becoming a part of German society. We need another word, or words, that better describe the process of creating a society where all of us belong and no one has to give up their identity.

Because of Germany's history with National Socialism, it may be difficult for many native Germans to accept the idea that they consider themselves "superior" to immigrants and have power over immigrants. Because of pride and shame, it might be difficult for some immigrants to accept the idea that they have learned to feel "inferior" and that Germans have power over them.

I ask that you "try on" this model, and see how it might be useful for you.

## **Old Fashioned Oppression of Immigrants**

Examples of old fashioned oppression in Germany include

- prominent Germans who make statements about German superiority and immigrant inferiority;
- denying voting rights to established immigrants who are not citizens but who pay taxes and have lived in Germany for many years, sometimes decades

- having standards for job qualification and German language fluency that are not necessary or realistic;
- civil servants who are hostile to immigrants and who refuse to apply laws that benefit immigrants;
- not allowing refugees to travel freely, denying them educational and job opportunities, and forcing them to live in substandard housing;
- assault and murder of immigrants.

In response to old fashioned oppression, some immigrants lie about their name, age, legal status, and country of origin. Or, they stay in their own communities to protect themselves and limit their contact with Germans, avoiding cities and states where they might be at risk (“no-go” areas). Or, they engage in so-called illegal activities, but these activities may be illegal simply because the laws are written by the dominant group, in this case, native German politicians, without considering the impact on the minority group, or as a way to control the lives of people in the minority group.

For example, in Bavaria, refugees in the process of seeking asylum in Germany are not allowed to travel outside of Bavaria. If they do, they are treated as criminals. Another example is “Schwarzarbeit:” people who work without the required certification to do certain types of work or without reporting their income and thus avoiding paying taxes. Of course, activities in the “black market” are illegal for everyone in Germany. But the laws which control who can do which type of work are sometimes written to prevent foreigners from access to certain jobs so that native Germans can have these jobs. And because of discrimination against immigrants in the job market in general, working in the black market might be one of the only options for immigrants to find work, earn money, and pay for their basic needs and provide for their family.

When people in a society are oppressed, they will do whatever they can to survive, even when it means doing things that are defined as illegal. In this model, we call these *survival behaviors*.

## **Modern Oppression**

Modern oppression of immigrants describes the subtle and unintentional ways that Germans keep themselves in positions of power, make most or all decisions about Integration policy, and maintain their sense of superiority over immigrants.

Five modern oppression behaviors, with examples, are

### **Avoiding Personal Contact with Immigrants**

- Studying immigrants, and becoming an “expert” about immigrant culture, without having personal relationships with immigrants, and without having studied oneself and one’s own culture;

- Living in a community where there are few or no immigrants, or not getting to know neighbors who are immigrants, and not wanting their children to attend schools where there are “too many” immigrant children;
- Maintaining tight and inflexible networks so that immigrants have to fight to get into the networks;
- Asking an immigrant “Where do you come from?” without being interested in learning who they are as a person, and without sharing information about yourself;
- Having superficial contact with immigrants at a cultural event, as a consumer (for example, at an “ethnic” restaurant), or through work related projects – but not as friends with equal social status.

### **Denying differences**

- Saying “we are all the same” and ignoring cultural differences;
- Ignoring differences in peoples’ ability to learn a second language;
- Instead of accepting and appreciating differences among immigrants, believing that some immigrant groups are superior and others inferior;
- Insisting that immigrants identify as German and not bi-cultural (for example, Turkish German or German Turkish);
- Refusing to acknowledge that some people with an immigrant background are German.

### **Not Realizing the Impact of Oppression on Immigrants**

- Not appreciating the contributions of immigrants to the economy, historically and in the present, and not recognizing that immigrants pay taxes the same as native Germans;
- Not appreciating the amount of effort immigrants put into integrating, and the emotional and physical cost of that effort, as well as the cost of living with the threat of old fashioned oppression;
- Describing immigrant communities as Parallelgesellschaften (or “ghettos”) without understanding why immigrants live together by choice or necessity, and not acknowledging that Germans also live Parallelgesellschaften, communities where there are no or very few immigrants;

- Not realizing the difficulty, especially for adults, of learning and using a second language.

### **“Helping” Immigrants**

- Developing integration policy without equal participation of immigrants; creating official committees that are responsible for integration but have no immigrants as members;
- Professionals who develop projects and programs for immigrants based on what they think will be helpful, instead of working together as equals or supporting immigrants in what they want;
- Giving advice to immigrants, for example, insisting that only German be spoken at home;
- Requiring immigrants to attend German language courses, even though the courses may not be very effective: many of the students drop out and are not successful.

### **Blaming Immigrants and Immigrant Cultures**

- Describing immigrants as a problem for the society, instead of recognizing assets that immigrants bring;
- Holding immigrants to unrealistic and unnecessary standards of language fluency; generalizations that some immigrant groups don't learn German or speak “bad” German;
- Blaming immigrants for not taking advantage of educational opportunities without recognizing discrimination in the school system;
- Taking little or no responsibility for past oppression of immigrants, failures of integration policy, poorly designed projects, and prejudice against immigrants.

### **Internalized Oppression**

There is a relationship between modern oppression and internalized oppression: in general, internalized oppression is a reaction to modern oppression, although once the process begins, the two reinforce each other.

Internalized oppression is a way to describe how immigrants become “powerless” and “inferior” in Germany, even though many of them were confident and accepted for who they are in their home countries.

Five internalized oppression behaviors, with examples, are

### **Avoiding Personal Contact with Germans**

- Obsessive mistrust of all Germans and German culture, and not getting to know Germans as individuals;
- Exaggerating their own immigrant identity when in contact with Germans;
- Not learning or using German, not improving their German, or not trying to find Germans who want to have conversations with immigrants.

### **Denying Own Immigrant Background**

- Seeing own immigrant culture as inferior;
- Distrusting members of own immigrant group and avoiding contact with them;
- Over adapting to German culture and standards (becoming more German than Germans).

### **Not Realizing the Impact of Oppression on Themselves**

- Not using resources that Germans and other immigrants offer, but thinking you can integrate and be successful completely on your own;
- Denying that the experience of being an immigrant in Germany has a negative impact psychologically, socially, politically, and economically;
- Not caring for yourself or seeking support when you become psychologically or physically sick from the experience of being an immigrant;
- Judging some immigrant groups as better than others, and even violence towards other immigrant groups or less powerful members of own immigrant group (horizontal violence).

### **Accepting “Help”**

- Accepting what is offered as “help” without telling Germans what you and other immigrants really need;
- Manipulating Germans to get what you want instead of saying directly what you want and demanding equality;
- Being “nice” instead of challenging Germans, based on the belief that you are dependent on Germans and can’t afford to offend them (“Don’t bite the hand that feeds you”).

### **Blaming Germans and German Culture**

- Endlessly complaining to other immigrants about Germans and German culture;
- Passive behavior, believing that there is nothing you can do to change your situation, and so not even trying;
- Refusing to improve German language ability or to learn German laws and customs.

The list of modern oppression behaviors for Germans is a little longer than the list of internalized oppression behaviors for immigrants. There is a reason for this: I seldom hear Germans take responsibility for the problems of integration, and often hear them blame immigrants. In contrast, most of the immigrants I know work hard to become integrated: they learn and use German to the level that they actually need to live here, they accept German values, they have contact with a variety of Germans, and they find a way to live here bi-culturally, becoming both German and holding onto their own cultural identities.

This “extra work” is typical of members of minority, subordinate groups in a society. If they want to succeed, they usually have to work harder and be better than the average member of the majority, dominant groups. Women, for example, often have to be better than most men, if they want to succeed in a male-dominated career.

### **How can we develop equality between native Germans and Immigrants? Alternatives to modern and internalized oppression**

In this last section, I offer some alternatives to modern and internalized oppression behaviors. Creating equality requires both similar and different tasks from Germans and immigrants. The tasks that are similar include

- deciding that we will share power, leadership, and resources equally;

- acknowledging that oppression exists, and that inequality based on immigrant status includes oppression based on skin color, country of origin, religion, gender, etc.; addressing problems of integration requires addressing racism, religious oppression, etc.;
- noticing and challenging discrimination;
- acknowledging and appreciating our differences, and affirming that each of our cultures has value and worth;
- working together to develop integration policy, and making sure that it includes the needs of both Germans and immigrants;
- encouraging all of us to be multi-lingual, recognizing the importance of using native language and dialect at home, and developing standards for German fluency based on what is realistic and what we actually need;
- jointly developing standards for job qualifications, expanding the concept of what “qualified” means, and using on-the-job experience to test if someone is qualified, instead of relying only on formal education to certify who might have the skills to do a particular job;
- when research on integration is conducted, developing research projects jointly, and conducting research on prejudice and discrimination, not simply measuring how well or poorly immigrants are integrated;
- when we work together, focusing both on concrete outcomes and building relationships and trust through personal contact.

**In addition to our shared tasks, if native Germans want to live with immigrants as equals, their tasks include**

- focusing on their own experience of integration, dealing honestly with their prejudices, and answering the question, “How is living in an intercultural society in my self interest?”;
- challenging other Germans who don’t see the necessity and benefits of living together as equals;
- listening when immigrants say what they are really thinking and feeling; some feelings, like anger, can be difficult to hear, but Germans need to learn to hear the anger of immigrants without getting defensive;
- learning how to communicate and listen to people who are using German as a second language, and accepting that immigrants who have learned German as

adults will almost always speak with an accent and make mistakes, and almost never speak like a native;

- seeking out immigrants for their expertise, not just about integration, but about anything.

### **If immigrants want to live with native Germans as equals, their tasks include**

- using the power they have to improve their own lives and the lives of other immigrants, and contributing their skills and knowledge to Germany;
- speaking up about discrimination, expressing their anger, and finding solutions to the problems they experience;
- challenging their own prejudices towards Germans and German culture, and challenging other immigrants who have prejudices towards Germany or towards other immigrants and immigrant cultures;
- learning German based on their ability and what they actually need;
- supporting other immigrants in their failures and successes, and finding the energy to continue trying, even when they experience oppression.

### **A final thought**

Translating this model to the German context will take time. It will take time to find the right words to use, and it will take time to adapt this model to Germany. I hope that other people take this model and improve it.

It will also take time to learn new behaviors and to build trust between native Germans and immigrants. We have a history of mistrust. But if we really want to create a society where we can live together in equality, and learn from and support each other, then I believe this model can help us.