
Confronting Oppression Through an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Individual and Collective Fear

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Abstract

Fear is not just an emotion. It is a mechanism of control, a system-preserving force that structures how people relate, conform, and oppress. While often treated as individual or irrational, fear operates across biological, psychological, relational, and societal levels. This paper argues that fear functions as a central yet under-theorized driver of oppression, normalizing exclusion and reinforcing dominance through both conscious and unconscious means. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives across social work, psychology, law, gender studies, and philosophy, this paper presents a recursive framework that traces the architecture of fear in relation to power and identity. The framework maps how fear sustains inequality, from internalized silence to systemic stratification, and how privilege is often built on its unacknowledged presence. Rather than siloing knowledge, this approach invites a convergence of trauma-informed theory, embodied inquiry, and systems thinking to expose fear's role in maintaining oppression and foreclosing liberation. It challenges readers to see fear not as a personal flaw or isolated response, but as a patterned and cultural inheritance that must be made visible to be transformed. By naming and mapping this terrain, the work of undoing it can begin.

Keywords: Fear, Oppression, Privilege, Embodiment, Interdisciplinary Framework, Trauma-Informed Analysis, Systemic Inequality, Power and Identity, Reflexivity

Author's Note

This paper was initially written in 2019 as part of my graduate studies. Since then, both societal conversations and my awareness have deepened. As a white-bodied, able-bodied queer person, I name my positionality to acknowledge the lens through which I write. I offer this paper as a reflection of my ongoing efforts to understand and take responsibility for my place within systems of privilege and oppression, and not as a definitive truth. I remain committed to learning from those most impacted and to revisiting my work and understanding with humility and accountability.

Introduction

Fear is more than just an emotion; it is a primary organizing force. It binds bodies, relationships, and institutions in recursive loops of control, suppression, and survival. We live within recursive systems where internal experience and external conditions mirror, amplify, and entrench one another, resulting in both embodied and structural consequences (Baker et al., 2009; Phillips, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2008). Many of us contribute to, and are affected by, the relationship between the individual and the collective, whether consciously or not (Mullaly & West, 2010; Bishop, 2002; Johnson, 2018). Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality underscores how individuals can simultaneously occupy positions of power and marginalization depending on their intersecting identities. Crisp (2014) highlights how this tension manifests in social contexts where individuals and institutions may strive for justice, while unconsciously reinforcing the systems they seek to transform.

In this paper, the use of the word "we" is meant to reflect the shared responsibility and interdependence of all people within oppressive systems, rather than generalizing experiences or erasing differences. Our positionality shapes our roles and responsibilities, yet no one is entirely separate from these dynamics. This inclusive "we" invites reflection, not blame.

Injustice and inequity are embedded in social structures but are enacted in interpersonal and relational containers. As Winker and Degele (2011) explain, our individual interactions with the

collective, and vice versa, create and sustain these systems. Intersectionality and the matrix of oppression reveal how racism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, ageism, and other forces intersect to shape our internal and external realities (Collins, 2017; Whitesel, 2017). Remedios and Snyder (2018) offer that individuals holding multiple stigmatized identities often experience intensified invisibility and distancing from dominant groups, which are forms of oppression that can be just as harmful as overt discrimination. Recognizing this, equity and social change become even more pressing pursuits that demand both collective engagement and individual commitment (Mullaly & West, 2010; Stahl, 2017).

This paper explores the role fear plays in both upholding and resisting oppression. Fear is a critical, often overlooked force that drives social inequities. Though often overlooked, fear drives social inequities. While explored within trauma studies and sociology, it is rarely mapped across systems as a recursive force. This approach draws from disciplines including social work, psychology, gender studies, sociology, law, and philosophy. This paper addresses two central questions: First, in what ways do individual and collective fear function as mechanisms of oppression and inequity? Second, how can interdisciplinary frameworks illuminate more effective pathways toward equity?

Rather than isolating fear within a single disciplinary silo, this paper offers a synthesized framework, using a conceptual map of fear as a multifaceted force that operates across biology, psychology, relationships, and systemic structures. This recursive model traces how fear loops through individual nervous systems and collective institutions, reinforcing and solidifying the conditions that created it. For this paper, "recursive" refers to a cyclical process in which fear serves as both a response to and a reinforcement of oppression. Fear takes root in the body, ripples through relationships, and embeds itself in institutional norms, laws, and policies. Each layer reinforces the next, perpetuating the conditions that sustain the cycle. This cycle is not a simple cause-and-effect pattern; it is a recursive loop: fear shapes systems, and those systems return to deepen fear. Understanding this dynamic reveals how oppression is sustained not through isolated acts but through feedback loops of emotional, relational, and structural reinforcement.

The intention is not to propose a new theory of oppression, but to make visible the embodied emotional undercurrents that uphold it. This approach weaves established theories through a

systems-level, trauma-informed lens that centers both internalized and externalized dynamics. While this paper primarily draws from Western interdisciplinary fields, it acknowledges that Indigenous epistemologies have long understood fear not as a pathology, but as a relational disruption between land, lineage, spirit, and self (Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). These frameworks offer both critique and ceremonial pathways for restoration. (Their absence here reflects the limitations of the author's training, not their irrelevance.)

By mapping the relationship between fear, oppression, and privilege through an interdisciplinary lens, this paper suggests that we begin dismantling the very systems we may benefit from or unconsciously uphold. This mapping and dismantling process demands reflexivity, community, and collaboration. It requires that we move beyond discipline-specific silos and begin seeing the interconnected nature of fear and power.

Fear: Individual and Collective

To understand how fear becomes deeply embedded in our choices and behaviours, we must first examine its biological origins and then trace how those primal survival responses have been manipulated to serve social, political, and racial agendas. Fear has not only shaped individual coping mechanisms but has also been deliberately mobilized to uphold racial hierarchies and white supremacy. In settler colonial states such as Canada and the United States, public narratives have framed Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities as threats; a move that justifies surveillance, criminalization, and systemic violence (Holmes et al., 2016; Kira et al., 2018). Morgensen (2010) critiques how settler colonialism constructs Indigenous presence as a fundamental threat to national identity, using legal codes, media narratives, and cultural symbols to suppress Indigenous sovereignty and uphold colonial order. Building on these insights, fear can be understood not merely as an emotion, but as a form of infrastructure that is deployed to preserve power hierarchies and legitimize control under the guise of safety.

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality was developed to reveal how legal and social frameworks often ignore the compounding effects of multiple oppressions. Her analysis of how Black women's experiences were rendered invisible in both feminist and anti-racist discourse

illuminates how systemic oppression operates broadly and in the unseen spots of supposedly progressive systems. Similarly, Collins' (2017) "matrix of domination" outlines how power is organized along intersecting axes of race, gender, class, and other factors, not just in structural terms, but also through embedded cultural norms and knowledge systems. Together, these frameworks prompt us to examine who is harmed and how epistemologies and institutions perpetuate that harm through fear, invisibility, and normalization.

White fear, in particular, is often institutionalized, subtle, and politically expedient. Johnson (2018) highlights how it undergirds tough-on-crime legislation, border militarization, school discipline policies, and neighbourhood segregation, a point reinforced by Ferber et al. (2009) and Whitesel (2017). While racialized individuals are forced to navigate daily survival in the face of such fear-driven structures, white individuals often remain insulated from the consequences of their fear and are rarely asked to confront how their discomfort can fuel systemic harm (Ramsy, 2014).

Ben-Ze'ev (2001), from an emotion-theory perspective, asserts that fear of loss, whether of identity, power, or safety, can trigger defensive aggression. This framing is echoed in Freire's (2018) assertion that the oppressed, when internalizing the logic of domination, may reproduce oppressive behaviours in a quest for control. Bauman (2001), in his examination of modernity's moral collapse, suggests that the pursuit of security in contemporary society renders uncertainty intolerable; thereby legitimizing exclusion and domination as protective strategies. Together, these thinkers highlight how fear does not merely paralyze; it provokes action, often at the expense of others. Domination is not born from power but from the fragility of perceived threat.

I offer this reflection not to center myself, but to name how whiteness is structured through fear: fear of losing dominance, certainty, and the sanitized narratives that uphold selective memory. As Bauman (2001) illustrates, modern societies often suppress moral responsibility in the pursuit of order and control, enabling harmful systems to persist under the guise of rationality. Freire (2018) echoes this by naming how the logic of dominance becomes internalized, reproducing cycles of oppression. Understanding this dissonance is necessary if we are to interrupt cycles of harm and truly center equity in our work.

Fear is among the most basic and universal human emotions, deeply entwined with our need to survive and belong. As Ben-Ze'ev (2001) explains, fear affects both our psychological and physiological states, manifesting in response to real, imagined, or anticipated threats. These responses often persist long after the original threat, primarily through trauma (Holmes et al., 2016; Morgan, 2002; Rosenthal, 2016).

Biology alone cannot explain how fear becomes narrative. Beyond the body's reflexes, fear becomes narrative through the mind's interpretations. Ben-Ze'ev (2001) identifies three intentional components of fear: a cognitive belief that a negative situation is probable, an evaluative judgment of its undesirability, and a motivational urge to avoid it. Left unchecked, fear can become self-fulfilling, limiting hope, restricting action, and reinforcing cycles of avoidance and control. This internalized fear allows privilege to operate unchallenged, muting the bodily cues that something is wrong. It rewards distance from discomfort, mastery over emotion, and loyalty to the very systems that benefit from one's complicity. Disability justice frameworks illuminate how dominant timelines, sensory norms, and productivity metrics pathologize embodied variance. Oppression here is not just exclusion, it is temporal and spatial control (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Samuels, 2017).

When fear takes root in our psyche, it rarely remains isolated; instead, it often spreads to other areas of our lives. It becomes intertwined with identity, learned behaviours, and social expectations, especially when those fears are shaped by collective messaging. Culturally, fear often centers around threats to survival and social standing. These internalized fears are not experienced equally—they are racialized, gendered, and classed, disproportionately burdening marginalized bodies (Freire, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2010). To feel safe, individuals often draw rigid distinctions between themselves and others, leading to the creation of the "Other", those deemed outside the dominant norm based on race, gender, class, sexuality, physical ability, religion, etc. (Anthias, 2014; Tummala-Nara, 2016). Drawing from disability justice theorists like Mingus (2017), I interpret the dominant culture's aversion to interdependence and unpredictability as a fear-based response that sustains ableist systems. Crip theorists suggest that privilege often rests on the illusion of control over body, time, and autonomy. Fear of disability is not just fear of pain or

limitation, but fear of becoming vulnerable, visible, or care-dependent in a culture that pathologizes all three. Similarly, Indigenous scholars frame fear as a weapon of erasure, targeting bodies, cosmologies and kinship systems (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These frameworks are referenced with gratitude and awareness that I do not speak from within them. These insights expose fear as a systemic mechanism that enforces dominance not just through overt violence, but by suppressing relational forms of knowing and being.

Systems of oppression are organized around privileging dominant groups. These systems reinforce myths of superiority and fear-based responses to difference. Ben-Ze'ev (2001) notes that fear can reinforce social norms and inhibit actions that deviate from them. When those norms are rooted in discrimination or domination, fear becomes a powerful tool of social control, blocking collective liberation and reinforcing social stratification (Mullaly & West, 2010; Ritzer & Dean, 2015). However, another layer remains: the body. Somatics offers a portal to understanding fear not only as an idea or identity but as a lived, physiological truth.

While Ben-Ze'ev (2001) argues that fear maintains social norms by alerting us to threats against what we value, he fails to account for the dangerous power of oppressive norms themselves, norms shaped not by collective care, but domination and exclusion. When myths rooted in supremacy and othering become the foundation of societal values, fear no longer protects the social good; it preserves harm. These fear-based norms, often presented as neutral or necessary, instead reproduce structural violence and cultural erasure (Freire, 2018; Golash-Boza, 2019; Johnson, 2018; Morgensen, 2010; Mullaly & West, 2010; Turner, 2007).

This section illustrates how fear, far from being a private emotional state, operates as a systemic force, shaping policies, legitimizing violence, and reinforcing hierarchies. It reinforces the central argument of this paper: that to challenge oppression, we must understand fear not just psychologically, but structurally and culturally, across multiple levels of analysis.

Stratification and Rationalization

Social stratification is both a result of and a contributor to fear-based social order. As Foucault (1995) has argued, Enlightenment-era rationalization has introduced values such as efficiency,

control, and predictability into human interaction, often severing emotion from ethics. Bauman (2001), focusing on the Holocaust, demonstrates how these same rationalizing processes—when left unchecked—can facilitate profound moral disengagement, making oppression appear orderly and justifiable. These values, when prioritized over humanity, can dehumanize and justify harm (Marsden, 2016; Ritzer & Dean, 2015). These processes of rationalization and emotional detachment do not just reflect modern values. They also serve as protective measures for those in positions of power. This allows fear to be externalized and embedded into social systems. Fear becomes written into laws, curricula, and expectations, making oppression appear logical or even necessary.

These processes of rationalization and emotional detachment are not merely reflections of modern values. They serve as protective measures for those in positions of power. Fear is externalized and embedded into social systems, written into laws, curricula, and expectations. This makes oppression appear logical, even necessary. As individuals disconnect from their emotional landscape, fear and confusion often increase. As individuals disconnect from their emotional landscape, fear and confusion often increase. Morgan (2002) describes this disconnection as a defence mechanism to avoid the pain of social suffering, a suffering that is real and deeply felt, whether through exclusion, poverty, or violence.

Nevertheless, this pain is frequently minimized or ignored. For example, policy debates on homelessness often frame the issue in terms of economic burden or public safety, rather than a failure of compassion or justice. Such emotional avoidance becomes a tool of self-protection for the privileged and a silencing force for the oppressed; thereby enabling the continued rationalization of injustice and a refusal to confront complicity in harm.

Oppression functions across individual, institutional, and cultural levels, sustained not only through formal structures but through socialization and everyday participation (Crisp, 2014; Johnson, 2018; Tummala-Nara, 2016). Systems such as family, education, media, religion, and law transmit myths, stereotypes, and partial histories that both glorify and erase, shaping not only how we treat others but also how we see ourselves (Failler, 2009; Mullaly, & West, 2010). These inherited narratives "bolster or deflate our self-identity" based on our social position (Mullaly &

West, 2010; Wilson, 1999). When dominant institutions reinforce such myths, they embed misinformation into the fabric of culture, making injustice appear natural and inevitable. When new knowledge punctures these illusions, we are confronted with a choice. We can either perpetuate the familiar scripts of marginalization or interrupt the cycle and step into accountable solidarity (Bishop, 2002; Johnson, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2010).

Oppression

Oppression is commonly defined as a system of structural and ideological domination that unjustly harms individuals and communities pushed to the margins (Chen, 2017; Crisp, 2014; Windsor et al., 2014). At its core, it concerns how we respond, or fail to respond, to difference. As Failler (2009) notes, stereotypes, historical erasure, and epistemic distortion sustain marginalization and are reinforced through repetition and normalization by dominant systems.

Mullaly and West (2010) frames oppression as both systemic and ideological, challenging the myth of neutrality within social structures. His structural social work model encourages us to examine our positionality and acknowledge how oppression is embedded in economic and institutional structures. Bishop (2002) complements this by advocating for becoming an ally, which is a relational practice grounded in recognizing one's complicity in systems of dominance. Johnson (2018) adds the importance of identity, narrative, and critical consciousness as tools for dismantling oppressive patterns. Together, these theorists show how privilege can be unconsciously held and how healing requires both internal transformation and collective accountability.

Structural oppression is perpetuated through formal institutions, including education, religion, media, and law. Johnson (2018) argues that these systems perpetuate myths of meritocracy and supremacy, conditioning people to internalize social hierarchies. Ferber et al. (2009) expand on this, showing how such myths obscure systemic inequality by framing success as solely dependent on individual effort. When confronted with new knowledge that challenges these beliefs, people face a choice: maintain the status quo or engage in the vulnerable work of allyship and systemic change (Bishop, 2002; Mullaly & West, 2010).

Experiencing Oppression as an Individual

Oppression manifests on the individual level through both overt acts of violence and subtle behaviours of aversion. Discriminatory policing, restricted access to services, and exclusionary policies instill ongoing fear in marginalized communities, often leading to chronic states of hypervigilance and trauma (Holmes et al., 2016; Kira et al., 2018). Equally damaging, though less visible, are unconscious micro-behaviours, such as avoiding eye contact, crossing the street, or shifting away, that communicate dehumanization through social distancing (Mullaly & West, 2010). These acts are often categorized as microaggressions and constitute a form of "everyday oppression" that reinforces social hierarchies and induces cumulative psychological harm (Dover, 2016).

Trauma is not only the result of discrete violent events but also accumulates through chronic exposure to systemic inequality (Holmes et al., 2016). Their work highlights how fear becomes biologically ingrained, resulting in prolonged stress responses that shape identity and relational patterns. Kira et al. (2018) further this by identifying "continuous traumatic stress," a framework recognizing that for many marginalized communities, the threat of harm is not past but ongoing. Oppression emerges both as an external force and a somatic and psychic loop, one that reproduces itself across generations unless actively disrupted. As Golash-Boza (2019) outlines, these intergenerational patterns of trauma are reinforced by systems of racial stratification, which construct fear-based social norms and myths that preserve dominance and dehumanize the marginalized.

To survive these conditions, individuals develop coping mechanisms that include masking, code-switching, deflecting, or altering aspects of their identity. These are not flaws, but signs of psychological resourcefulness in the face of a very real systemic threat (Tummala-Nara, 2016). Building on this, Johnson and Ndefo (2021) expand the understanding of survival responses by naming appeasement as a specific, embodied survival response that can mimic consent while masking internal distress. Rather than passive compliance, appeasement reveals the body's effort to preserve safety within power-laden relationships and institutions.

Oppression creates chronic threats to the development and maintenance of a coherent self (Kira et al., 2018; Mullaly & West, 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2016; Remedios & Snyder, 2018). Psychologically, fear-based oppression undermines identity formation, disrupting the stable sense of self that is vital to agency and autonomy. Under conditions of systemic threat, individuals may adopt defensive strategies such as suppressing aspects of identity, shifting roles, or reconfiguring their self-concept (Mullaly & West, 2010; Kira et al., 2018). These responses may appear as intrapsychic deflection, assimilation, or adaptive modification in the face of perceived danger. While some scholars also point to the role of identity ambivalence in upholding systems of privilege (Karcher, 2017; Johnson, 2018), the deeper psychic cost often falls on those living within oppressive structures.

These embodied responses are not merely psychological; they are somatic. The nervous system encodes chronic stress and fear through patterns of contraction, hypervigilance, and dissociation. The field of somatics highlights how trauma and oppression shape not only thought but also movement, posture, and internal sensation. Somatic frameworks reveal how oppression is etched into breath, muscle, and movement. As Haines (2019) argues, the body itself becomes a politicized terrain in trauma work, especially when the source of trauma is structural, not personal. While my training is rooted in Western somatics, body-based knowledge originates from diverse cultural and ancestral lineages, some of which have been historically erased, co-opted, or commodified.

My understanding of embodiment and nervous system response is shaped by study and influence from trauma-informed, anti-oppressive somatic frameworks, including the Resilience Toolkit (developed by Nkem Ndefo), Staci Haines' (2019), *The Politics of Trauma*, and Rae Johnson's (2023) *Embodied Activism: Engaging the Body to Cultivate Liberation, Justice, and Authentic Connection*. These approaches honour the body's survival responses not as dysfunction, but as adaptive strategies shaped by structural forces. While rooted in Western somatics, I also seek to remain in integrity by not co-opting Indigenous or ancestral somatic wisdoms outside my lived or trained experience.

Internalization and the Politics of Respectability

Internalized oppression shapes both self-perception and relational dynamics. To avoid harm, many unconsciously adopt the dominant culture's values, behaviours, and expectations, even when these adaptations undermine their sense of self. This internalization of oppression can operate as a survival strategy, rooted in fear and shaped by historical and systemic trauma.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) introduced the concept of the "politics of respectability" to describe how Black women, particularly in the early 20th century, adopted dominant cultural norms to survive racist and misogynist systems. While rooted in resistance, these strategies often demanded emotional regulation, self-policing, and the performance of "acceptable" identity to gain legitimacy within oppressive structures. Brittney Cooper (2017) critiques how such politics, though forged in survival, can ultimately reinforce the very systems they seek to subvert, demanding conformity over authenticity and placing the burden of transformation on the marginalized. This burden is shaped by fear: fear of exclusion, retaliation, or violence for not conforming to dominant norms of appearance, language, or behaviour (Cooper, 2017). These performances are often repackaged as professionalism or propriety, but as hooks (1992) argues, they do not dismantle white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; they reinforce it by upholding the illusion that safety can be earned through compliance. Respectability, while understandable, sustains the dangerous myth that survival is best achieved through submission rather than collective liberation.

The Recursive Loop: Fear as the Engine of Oppression

Terms such as "internalized oppression," "collective trauma," and "respectability politics" are rooted in Black feminist and queer-of-color scholarship. These frameworks resist pathologizing survival and instead locate adaptation within historical and systemic contexts of resistance. Their inclusion here is in honour of those traditions, not as appropriation, but as part of an ongoing dialogue about power, survival, and embodied knowledge.

The internal toll of such adaptation can be immense. Research links chronic oppression to emotional suppression, low self-esteem, disembodiment and internalized fear (Karcher, 2017; Ramsy, 2014). Without intervention, these responses can calcify into lasting psychological

patterns, reinforcing a false sense of inferiority and disconnection from one's whole self. The psychological and somatic responses explored here show that fear is not only imposed from the outside but internalized and encoded in the body. This dance between the internal and external underscores how oppression is recursively sustained, not just by external systems, but by the embodied legacies of fear they produce. This recursive loop lies at the heart of this paper's argument: fear must be mapped across internal and external domains to be meaningfully interrupted.

Privilege

Privilege operates as an invisible architecture of unearned advantages that benefit some while systematically disadvantaging others (Johnson, 2018; Crisp, 2014; Mullaly & West, 2010). Those who hold privilege are often unaware of it, or may resist acknowledging it, because doing so can evoke discomfort, guilt, or the threat of losing social status (Bishop, 2002; Riger, 1993). Foss and Elliott (2015) describe a structural-performative contradiction in which individuals may acknowledge systemic injustice while enacting responses that preserve the very structures they claim to resist. This contradiction, often shaped by fear, identity threat, or social conditioning, leads to symbolic rather than transformative action; ultimately reinforcing existing privilege.

The myths that sustain privilege, such as meritocracy, rugged individualism, and competition, operate as rationalizing narratives. Ferber et al. (2009) demonstrate how these stories are woven into cultural discourse, casting success as purely the result of individual effort. Mullaly & West (2010) adds that these beliefs function as psychological defences, insulating the privileged from the moral weight of structural harm.

As Ben-Ze'ev (2001) observes, the fear of loss—whether of power, identity, or safety—can drive individuals or groups to dominate as a form of self-preservation. Freire (2018) similarly argues that domination often emerges not from strength, but from fear—fear of vulnerability, uncertainty, and change. While Bauman (2001) does not frame domination in emotional terms, his analysis of modern bureaucracies reveals how the pursuit of control and certainty can normalize dehumanization. Once enacted, domination becomes recursive. Those who are oppressed or

harmful by power may replicate harm in an attempt to reclaim control (Holmes et al., 2016; Kira et al., 2018). In this way, fear and privilege become mutually reinforcing, entangled in cycles of protectionism and violence.

Denial is driven by this fear of loss and further obscures the visibility of privilege and sustains systems of harm. Fear, here, becomes a tool of power, obscuring injustice, rationalizing avoidance, and maintaining dominance through emotional and narrative control. This dynamic encapsulates the core argument of this paper: that fear operates across both personal and systemic domains to normalize and protect oppression. If fear and privilege co-construct harm, then any path to transformation must be as layered and interdisciplinary as the harm itself.

While this paper does not center case studies or fieldwork, it offers an applied interdisciplinary synthesis grounded in human systems thinking. Rather than isolating theory from lived experience, it maps how fear and privilege manifest biologically, psychologically, relationally, and structurally. This approach is critical given my positionality as a white-bodied writer. My aim is not to narrate experiences that are not mine, but to offer a reflexive framework that bridges theory and embodiment, tracing the recursive processes that sustain or interrupt oppression.

Creating Change Through Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interdisciplinary and collaborative work enables us to explore complex social phenomena through a critical, reflexive, discerning, and holistic lens (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012; Repko & Szostak, 2017; Rose, 2016). Rather than reinforcing siloed knowledge systems that shield dominant worldviews, interdisciplinary approaches widen the field of vision, spacious enough to hold contradiction, complexity, and transformation.

Interdisciplinary approaches provide a means to synthesize insights across various fields into a holistic and coherent understanding of how fear operates at both individual and systemic levels. However, an interdisciplinary approach must also include knowledge traditions that are often excluded from academic legitimacy, such as Indigenous cosmologies of relationality (Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008), and disability justice's radical reimagining of care, time, and bodymind futures (Mingus, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). While these theorists may not center fear

explicitly, I extrapolate from their frameworks to underscore how exclusionary structures shape collective emotional life. Without such perspectives, the interdisciplinary lens risks replicating the very exclusions it seeks to dismantle.

This expansiveness matters. Oppression operates across biological, psychological, relational, and structural domains. No single discipline can chart or interrupt its whole machinery. Drawing from multiple fields helps us disrupt not only harmful outcomes, but also the emotional and intellectual habits that sustain them. It calls us to examine our complicity: to ask how we benefit, where we are blind, and what truths we resist in the name of comfort or expertise (Crisp, 2014; Mullaly & West, 2010; Johnson, 2018).

The work of decentering the self is not abstract; it is a tangible process. It asks us to consciously interrupt our reflexes toward control, certainty, or social approval (instincts often activated by fear) (Ben-Ze'ev, 2001). Collaboration, then, becomes more than a method. It becomes a relational discipline of humility and accountability. Interdisciplinary collaboration holds transformative potential. It is about integrating knowledge and interrupting stagnation, both personal and systemic. When we honour diverse disciplines, especially those grounded in lived experience and critical reflexivity, we begin to unlearn the emotional architecture of oppression. This synthesis moves us beyond critique and into embodied, collective action. It invites us to remove the intellectual blinders that fear has built and to imagine liberatory futures no single field can define on its own.

Even when individuals recognize systemic injustice, they may hesitate to act. Foss and Elliott (2015) describe this hesitation as a *structural-performative contradiction* (a gap between awareness and resistance) where fear, guilt, or identity threat produce symbolic gestures rather than structural change. Naming this contradiction is a vital step in shifting from intention to genuine transformation.

To support this shift, anti-oppressive theorists offer practices that move insight into action. Mullaly & West (2010) and Johnson (2018) propose foundational steps:

- Acknowledge that oppression and privilege exist

- Learn to listen and bear witness without defensiveness
- Take risks: make noise, be seen, and name harm clearly
- Step off the familiar paths, even in small ways
- Model and practice alternative behaviours, even when unpopular
- Promote change in how systems are organized around dominance
- Collaborate and build coalitions
- Track and disrupt the power of fear in yourself and your environments
- Refuse inherited standards of silence or complicity
- And above all, never give up

These are not just moral aspirations. They are practices of emotional risk and relational courage, engaging both inward reflection and outward accountability.

In addition to personal actions, applied interdisciplinary tools help shift systems from within. For example:

- The *Five Faces of Oppression* framework (Shlasko, 2015; Young, as cited) helps participants identify how violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism appear in their lives and communities. It supports reflection, coalition building, and positionality mapping.
- Peacemaking circles and critical dialogue practices (Parker, 2015) offer conflict transformation rooted in relationship rather than retribution.
- Anti-oppression tracking frameworks (Yee et al., 2015) expose how organizations reproduce or resist inequity. These tools help teams document and revise practices and outcomes with transparency and care.

- Community-centred models of adaptive governance (Arnold et al., 2017) emphasize interdisciplinary and grassroots collaboration, enabling co-created solutions that are dynamic, inclusive, and locally grounded.

Riger (1993) critiques mainstream empowerment models for reinforcing masculine-coded ideals of control and mastery, which undercut collective transformation. Instead, a fear-informed lens centers cooperation, emotional depth, and community-based adaptation. Qualities are often dismissed as soft but are essential for real change. Tummala-Nara (2016) affirms that an anti-oppression lens must attend to power across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic levels, rooted in multicultural, feminist, and trauma-informed paradigms.

Together, these tools reimagine change not as heroic individual effort, but as collective, ongoing work, an emotional and structural redesign. If fear is the pulse of oppression, then collaboration is its remedy. Not passive consensus, but active co-creation. Not just interdisciplinarity in theory, but in embodiment, policy, pedagogy, and practice.

Conclusion

Bringing these layers together reveals the power of interdisciplinary synthesis. However, theory alone is not enough. We must both internally and externally inquire how these insights can inform our actions and guide us toward achieving equity. Let us return to the central question: How do individual and collective fear fuel oppression, and how might interdisciplinary insight become the key to interrupting it?

This paper argues that fear is not just a personal emotion or a political tool. It is a systemic force. When traced through biological, psychological, relational, and structural lenses, fear emerges as a mechanism that preserves familiarity, protects dominance, and resists discomfort. An interdisciplinary approach illuminates the connective tissue between the internal and institutional, between a clenched jaw in a staff meeting and a centuries-old policy of exclusion.

Psychology reveals internalized fear and coping strategies. Sociology situates those strategies within broader norms. Gender studies, critical race theory, and disability justice show how fear burdens marginalized bodies in different ways. Somatic awareness reminds us that fear lives not

only in thought, but in breath and bone. Together, these fields expose what we fear, why we fear it, and how fear is shaped by power. Without this kind of lens, oppression is often reduced to either personal failure or abstract systems. We miss the recursive loops: how childhood socialization, nervous system conditioning, and unconscious bias intersect with inherited histories and institutional scripts. We may feel pressure to "be better" without understanding the architecture of internalized fear, or critique systems without recognizing how fear compels even the well-intentioned to uphold them.

For those of us who benefit from dominant systems, this framework holds up a mirror. It asks not only what we believe, but how fear shapes those beliefs: fear of loss, fear of being wrong, fear of discomfort. It challenges us to examine the parts of ourselves that are trained to constrict, retreat, or perform, and to wonder what becomes possible when we begin to feel differently, not just think differently. The significance of this discussion lies in its invitation: to move beyond critique into compassionate excavation, and to use fear as both a diagnostic tool and a map. By understanding how fear functions in our bodies, relationships, and institutions, we create conditions for more profound change. Change that is curious, embodied, and collective. For BIPOC communities, who disproportionately bear the weight of systemic fear and institutional neglect, this approach invites institutions to take responsibility for historical harm and the chronic retraumatization woven into policy, culture, and expectation.

This is not just a conceptual shift; it offers practical pathways. In education, trauma-informed pedagogy can benefit from recognizing fear as both somatic and behavioural, where a student's dissociation is seen not as defiance, but as a response to threat. In organizations, equity work can be strengthened by naming fear-based reactions in leadership, not to shame, but to interrupt cycles of harm. In policy, fear-informed audits could expose punitive norms disguised as neutrality, from welfare rules to policing protocols. These shifts are grounded in interdisciplinary insight and move us toward more nuanced and accountable change.

Fear will always walk beside transformation. However, when we understand its roots (biological, social, psychological), we can meet it with more than a reflex. We can meet it with awareness, with solidarity, and with the imagination required to reshape what no longer serves. True

interdisciplinarity requires expanding what counts as knowledge. Indigenous teachings remind us that fear can be a teacher, not just a tyrant (Simpson, 2017; Wilson, 2008). Disability justice demands that we reorient our metrics of worth and strength (Mingus, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). These perspectives deepen the invitation to resist oppression and to build new relational paradigms.

If fear is a teacher, not just a tyrant, then liberation requires not its erasure but its reorientation. We do not conquer fear; we befriend it, learn from it, and walk with it into more just, embodied, and connected futures.

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