DEMYSTIFYING INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION:

A Reflection Guide

THE WINTERS GROUP INC.

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DEMYSTIFYING INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

We will reflect on these topics, modeling the difficult work of unpacking the messages that we have internalized from the dominant culture about our own identities.

This reflection guide includes a series of narratives and perspectives shared on The Winters Group's Inclusion Solution blog as part of the Demystifying Internalized Oppression Feature Series. The purpose of this guide is to revisit the perspectives shared and encourage greater self-reflection and critical thinking about the ways this topic influences your world. Also included in this guide are activities and reflection questions for you to engage in as you begin your journey.

As you read the perspectives shared by our authors, we encourage you to practice openness and choose curiosity over judgement. If you read something that you do not agree with, remember that we are only experts at our own experiences. Lean into feelings of discomfort or disagreement and ask yourself, "why might I be feeling this?" Or "What about who I am is influencing what I believe?" Consider what additional learning or information you may need to seek in order to fully understand the perspectives shared, and recognize that the work around diversity, equity, and inclusion is a journey.

This work is just a small part of it.

Demystifying Internalized Oppression:

An Introduction

By Leigh Morrison, Manager, Learning and Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.

When I was an undergraduate student at Wellesley College, one of my professors, Michael Jeffries, participated in an "Author Meets Critic" debate with Jason Reilly, a fellow Black man, and the author of the book "Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Are Making It Harder for Blacks to Succeed." Reilly's central argument is this: public attention to the challenges surrounding disenfranchisement and racism against Black people in America has done more harm than good, preventing progress by leading people of all races to believe that Black people need help—rather than empowering them to help themselves. He acknowledges that racism exists, but objects to any "special treatment" or assistance from political progressives, believing that Black individuals have the potential to change their own circumstances without outside support. In essence, he does not believe in using an "equity lens" when considering challenges, but rather in proceeding as if equality is fully possible, though it doesn't currently exist. This meritocratic argument is filled with holes and dramatic oversimplifications, which I won't unpack here. However, one moment in the debate struck me as being particularly interesting.

During the question and answer session, a student raised the point that even Black teachers and school administrators have been demonstrated to view Black students as a threat. She asked Reilly whether, as he claimed, this demonstrated that institutionalized racism is not the biggest challenge faced by people of color, or whether it in fact demonstrated that it was—that racism and biases are so insidious that people can internalize negative messages about their own identities. Reilly responded that he shares research about Black teachers' perceptions of Black students to make the point "that [racism] may not be driving [all inequalities that we observe]." I recall thinking, "*the fact that he isn't thinking of Black teachers perceiving Black children negatively as an internalized iteration of white racism is a central problem.*"

As the student suggested, times in which individuals hold biases against their own identities—biases informed by racist ideas from people in dominant groups to which they do not belong—or "internalized oppression," demonstrate exactly how pervasive and dangerous racism, sexism, and the many other "isms" we are working to extinguish can be. We miss a lot when we aren't taking internalized oppression into consideration.

Much of the current work in D&I spaces brings interpersonal or structural forms of oppression to light, but it's less common for D&I professionals to address internalized oppression and biases. These biases can be painful to unpack, particularly if we are personally and professionally committed to equity and inclusion. However, the insights we may reveal in the process can change our lives and actions for the better.

In this series, we will explore this topic, which can often feel taboo, through questions like:

- What parts of your identity have you internalized negative messages about?
- What experiences do you believe contributed to this internalization?
- What experiences have you had that helped you to recognize your internalized oppression?
- How has your internalized oppression shaped your thoughts or actions?
- How has your reflection on, or awareness about, your internalized oppression shaped your understanding of DEI work, or the world more broadly?

In the following essays, our writers will reflect on these topics, modeling the difficult work of unpacking the messages that we have internalized from the dominant culture about our own identities.

> " *Internalized biases can be painful to unpack, particularly if we are personally and professionally committed to equity and inclusion. However, the insights we may reveal in the process can change our lives and actions for the better.*

Reflection Activity

Who Am I? Identity Map

Prior to reading the following essays, reflect on your own identity. Social Identity is defined as a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). They shape our experiences and world view. Consider how you see yourself and how others may see you. Fill in the circles with the social identity groups of which you belong. For example, in the "race" circle list the racial group of which you identify (e.g. Black, white).

Some identity groups carry with them privilege and power. Their cultural, social practices are considered to be the norm regardless of the relative size of this group, and therefore any other practices or ways of being are considered different or "other." The privilege of being a part of the normative or "dominant group" rather than being the "other" or part of a "subordinated group" is the privilege of always being included. It is the privilege of not thinking about or questioning your presence and voice in normative spaces. Based on the identities you listed above and the definition of dominant and subordinated groups described below, make note of your dominant and subordinated groups.

- Dominant Group: A group with systemic power, privileges, and social status within a society. Dominant does not imply "majority."

- Subordinated Group: Social groups that have been traditionally/historically oppressed, excluded or disadvantaged in society. Subordinated does not imply "minority."

Example Dominant and Subordinated Groups in the U.S. Context

- Dominant Group
  - White
  - Men
  - Cisgender
  - Christians
  - Heterosexual
  - Able-Bodied
- Subordinated Group:
  - People of Color
  - Women
  - Transgender
  - Other Faiths, Muslims, Non-Practicing, etc.
  - LGBQ
  - Disabled

Understanding the identity groups of which you belong, and your subordinated and dominant group memberships will support you in thinking more critically about the ways in which you may internalize oppression and biases.

Consider:

- What messaging, norms, values and biases have you learned about the identity groups of which you belong?
- What messages were positive? Which messages were negative?
- Where did you learn them?
- In what ways have you observed these messages or biases play out in society more broadly? In the workplace?
- How have these messages (whether good or bad) shaped your thoughts or actions?

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The Pain of Internalized Oppression

By Mary-Frances Winters, President and CEO, The Winters Group, Inc.

When we choose to go deep in this work, it can be more than uncomfortable—it can be downright painful. As I think about the questions that Leigh Morrison posed in the introduction to this series, I admit that I was not particularly eager to reflect on so many painful memories of how internalized oppression has manifested for me. However, in service of the work and helping others to acknowledge and address the pain, I offer a glimpse into my own life in answer to her questions.

What parts of your identity have you internalized negative messages about?

I started to internalize negative messages about my race when I was 5 years old in kindergarten when one of the white boys called the only other Black child in the class and me the "n" word. We did not really understand what it meant but knew that it was not nice and that we were being bullied because of the color of our skin. That experience took me from being a carefree, curious little girl who thought she could do anything to one who was cautious and suspicious of white people because they might not like me simply because of my skin color. Consider the capability of a 5-year-old to make sense of this experience and its long-lasting impact. I learned in a very painful way at a very early age that race matters, and my race was considered inferior.
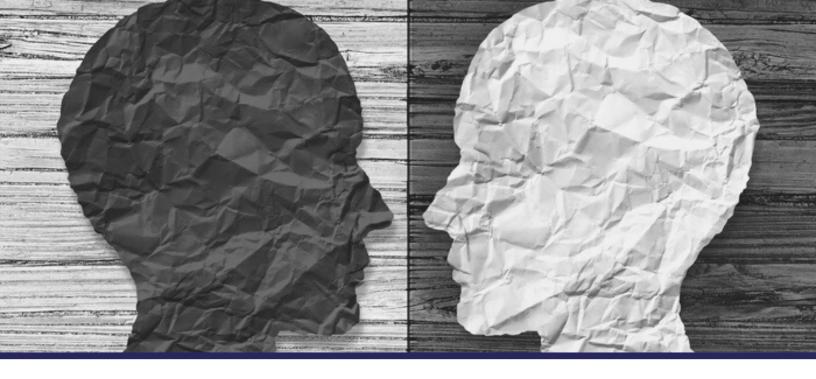
What experiences do you believe contributed to this internalization?

After that kindergarten experience, there were a number of other experiences. One that perhaps has a bit of a twist, which shows just how complex and insidious internalized oppression can be, relates to colorism. In middle school, I was called a "high yellow heifer" by other Black girls who claimed that I thought I was better because of my lighter skin (lighter than theirs).

There was a saying that I would overhear my parents and their friends quote: "If you are white, you are all right. If you are brown, stick around. And if you are Black, get back." Later, I learned it was a song written by Big Bill Broonzy, an African-American Blues singer who started his career in the 1920s. There was also the famous brown paper bag test that separated people within the Black community by color. If you were lighter than a brown paper bag, you were allowed entrance into establishments and clubs. While I could pass the brown paper bag test, for me it was not a positive. I had this so-called "advantage" on the one hand (not for me because I was not accepted by some of "my" own people) and on the other, I definitely felt inferior to the other white middle school girls who had long, blonde straight hair that did not frizz up when they went swimming. While I am sure well meaning, my mother would often scold me to "act my age, not my color," deepening the idea in my childhood-developing mind that Black was inferior.

After being accepted to the University of Rochester my senior year in high school, my guidance counselor called me into her office and shared that she was concerned that I might not be able to succeed at this private four-year University, and I might consider the local community college. What was she saying? I wasn't good enough? I was an honor roll student with a solid B+ average. She got to me. I doubted myself well into my junior year wondering if she was right that I had no business at this highly regarded university. On the other hand, some part of me was saying, "I will show her." And show her I did. I have two degrees from the University of Rochester and was elected as their first African-American Trustee in 1987.

One last memory (so this does not become a book) is from my early experience in corporate America. I was wearing a short afro hair style, and one of my colleagues asked me if my hair would grow. When I answered in the affirmative, he told me that I should let it.

Hair has always been a source of conflict for me and a place where internalized oppression has played out. The standard beauty is fair skin (not my light skin), and long, preferably, blonde hair. We see many black women today sporting long straight hair extensions because their natural hair does not look like that. I choose to wear my hair natural; however, I must admit that I am often self-conscious and insecure about it especially when I am presenting in front of largely white audiences. I am feeling different, and I guess unconsciously inferior.

How has your internalized oppression shaped your thoughts or actions?

There are two distinct ways that I can identify that my internalized oppression has shaped my thoughts and actions: (1) overly critical of my own race. The message "act your age, not your color," looms large in my psyche, and I know that I can be less forgiving and have higher standards. I think I do feel that as a black person we represent our entire race. (I know it should not be that way. I am showing real vulnerability here.) (2) I still experience the imposter syndrome. (Again, being really vulnerable here.) Even though I have owned and operated a business for 35 years and am considered by many a thought leader in the DEI field, imposter thoughts float through my mind more often than I would like. Although experts say that 70% of "successful" people experience the imposter syndrome, when you overlay race, it has a confounding effect that intensifies the phenomena.

> *Unless we change the narrative and give our children hope and instill in them their innate worth, internalized oppression will only intensify.*

How has your reflection on, or awareness about, your internalized oppression shaped your understanding of DEI work, or the world more broadly?

As I think about our future as a society, I worry about the profoundly negative impact on our children that the current socio-political climate is having and will continue to have for generations to come. Black and brown children are being told in very blatant, direct ways that they are inferior. Prior to the current administration in the U.S., the messages had become more subtle thanks to legislation (e.g. Civil Rights Act of 1964) and shifting mindsets. Brown children are being traumatized by current immigration policies that separate them from their parents and cage them like animals. Black children hear from the highest office of the land that their neighborhoods are infested and not fit for human occupancy. Unless we change the narrative and give our children hope and instill in them their innate worth, internalized oppression will only intensify. Internalized oppression keeps us from reaching our full potential, it undermines our confidence, leads to psychological disorders, and in extreme cases can lead to complete withdrawal and even violence.

Even as someone who considers herself well-adjusted and leading a happy and fulfilling life, when I go deep into reflection, I can see the ramifications of my own internalized oppression, and it is painful. I do this work, in part, to teach others about its impact and to help those dealing with it to heal. Raising awareness is the first step.

Reflection Activity

Consider Mary-Frances' reflection and responses to the questions:
- What aligned with your experiences?
- What was new or challenging for you to understand? Why might that be?

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Consider the identity groups on your identity map (specifically those that may be subordinated groups):
- What parts of your identity have you internalized negative messages about?
- What experiences do you believe contributed to this internalization?
- What experiences have you had that helped you to recognize your internalized oppression?
- How has your internalized oppression shaped your thoughts or actions?
- How has your reflection on, or awareness about, your internalized oppression shaped your understanding of DEI work, or the world more broadly?

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Being the "Model Minority" isn't a compliment: How internalizing the Model Minority Myth does more harm than good

By *Thamara Subramanian, Manager, Learning and Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.*

Striving to be a role model is something many children are encouraged to do: from the walls of kindergarten classrooms, to the dinner table, across sporting fields and beyond, children and their caregivers hear the idea of serving as a positive example for others as a sign of and step towards a successful future.

As a South Asian-American growing up in a mostly white midwestern suburb, I only have fond memories of my elementary school years and striving to be a role model student. I can vividly picture myself in 1st grade, jumping for joy and full of pride about getting the spelling test all right every Friday and never having a yellow sticky note denoting misbehavior next to my name on the bulletin board. I relished the attention teachers gave me and looked forward to my "gifted" learning classes every day.

I was treated as more mature, more passionate, having more potential than, and most importantly, as a "role model" for my other peers.

Sounds like a great educational experience for any child, right? Back then, I myself, my family, and many other Asian immigrant families like my own would have said yes in a heartbeat. But today I ask: At what cost? When we first began exploring internalized oppression as a team, I couldn't help but think of one of the most problematic "compliments" that I have encountered as a member of the Asian-American community and how I have internalized it: being the "Model Minority." This term has been used for decades to describe how the Asian-American population in America is exceptionally high-achieving, highly educated, and thus, a "model" for other minority groups to strive to emulate.

Chelsea Beck/NPR

So, why is the internalization of this myth such a harmful thing? After all, it has positive connotations—who wouldn't want their child or community to be seen as successful, educated, and especially respected, while still being a member of a minority in western culture? It sounds too good to be true.

In fact, the term "Model Minority" was not intended to be a compliment or celebration of respect for Asian Americans; it was intended to be a tool for manipulation and an excuse for oppression. The term was coined by white Americans during the 1960s civil rights era to differentiate and shame African Americans for their protests and activism in service of equal rights in America. Asian-American political activism for equal rights during this era was unusual or absent altogether. Thus, white Americans exploited their (seeming) flattery of Asian Americans, using it as an argument against equal rights for other brown and black Americans.

Asian Americans were often seen in high status professions such as medicine, law, and engineering. Others in the community were viewed as hardworking and family-oriented business people who were satisfied with their lives in America. However, the reality was that most Asian immigrants during this time were required to have a certain professional credentials or aspirations for post graduate education to be granted immigration privileges and thus, access to wealth in America. And while Asian culture is more collectivist than the individualistic American culture, some of these collectivist values were, and still are, immensely valued in the U.S.—such as commitment to family and faith.

In short, the logic of the Model Minority Myth was: "If they are fine, why are African Americans so demanding? Why do *they* need special attention?"

Sadly, this logic, and juxtaposing African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities with Asian Americans continues to this day. In the diversity and inclusion space, we continue to expose the history of the "Model Minority." Yet, in the decades since the coining of the term, many Asian Americans, including myself, have come to internalize the idea (whether consciously or unconsciously) of being the best minority, the group that aspires to and achieves greater academic and economic success in America.

The consequence of this myth is cyclic: misconstruing and manipulation of Asian American cultural patterns and values has led to the continued oppression of African Americans and other historically marginalized groups, and simultaneous aggrandization of Asian American success and assimilation into white American ideals. This further perpetuates internalization of this myth among Asian immigrants and their children: the need to achieve the highest potential in the educational system, the highest professional degrees, every opportunity for growth and success in America.

I see the cycle continue in myself and fellow Asian American peers: Internalizing this myth of success as a need to push ourselves (to unhealthy degrees) to achieve what our parents were striving for, and to fit the "Model Minority" mold. Subconsciously, we know that this is really the Model Minority Myth and that the reality of being Asian in America still consists of layers of hate, racism, and systemic oppression. In reality, we are aggravating our mental well-being and perpetuating this cycle of diminishing our racial identity to a number on a test, salary for a job, or letters behind our names.

> **"**
> *I urge everyone to think of one way to resist the cycle of oppression perpetuated by this myth and instead, advocate to address ongoing injustices within the Asian American community. We are more than the 100% on a spelling test.*

So how can we break this cycle, as inclusive members of our communities? Asian American or not, it is important to recognize that internalizing the Model Minority Myth is further preventing our society from tackling root causes of injustice for all racial and ethnic minorities in America. We can fight this harmful narrative and question our current practices:

- Educators: listen carefully and reflect on times when you have possibly treated Asian American students differently. Are you pushing the African American students to the same potential? Are your behavioral interpretations of success or misbehavior in the classroom applied equitably?
- Policymakers: What are the implications of grouping all Asian Americans together as one? How can we better take into consideration disparities in the Asian community, particularly the health and well-being of refugee communities and low-income Asian Americans that might be hidden in the dominant narrative?
- Community Members: What assumptions do we make about our Asian peers? Who do we see as high achieving or hard working? Who do we see as an exception or a result of Affirmative Action?

Lastly, I call for action from my fellow Asian American peers and allies: we can unlearn the internalization of the Model Minority Myth to break the cycle of oppression of our other black and brown friends and family. We must consciously use our power and serve as allies and advocates for our Americans of color to shed greater light on the injustices that exist as a result of our exploitation as the "model." Additionally, I urge everyone to think of one way to resist the cycle of oppression perpetuated by this myth and instead, advocate to address ongoing injustices within the Asian American community. We are more than the 100% on a spelling test.

Reflection Activity

Consider Thamara's reflection and your own experiences:
- What resonated with you most?
- In what ways have you observed, experienced and/or perpetuated the 'Model Minority' myth in your world?

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Consider your identity map:
- What messages have you internalized about your group(s) that may seem positive but could have a negative impact on our broader quest for equity, justice, and inclusion?

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How a Women's College Student (Re)Learns to Love Women

By Leigh Morrison, Manager, Learning and Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.

By my junior year in high school, I knew I wanted to attend a women's college. As my college search wore on, the co-ed schools I had considered gradually dropped off the list until, inspired by older friends who had taken the women's college path before me (and my 17-year-old stubbornness), I submitted my deposit to my number one choice: Wellesley College. To anyone who dared question this choice or offer the unsolicited "I could never be only around women—too much drama," I retorted with an empty phrase I had memorized: "That's sexist. Women's colleges are empowering!" And empowered I would become—not without with some bumps along the way.

At the same time I was preaching the gospel of feminism around my high school and craving the surroundings of the empowered women that I encountered on my college visits, some of my attitudes betrayed contradictions that complicated the picture of me as an enlightened feminist. I regularly discussed with a friend how, when I had children, I wanted boys. On one of my college tours, I saw a museum advertising an exhibit about the history of women in dentistry and thought, "How boring."

Increasingly, I opted for androgynous or masculine clothing and presentation over feminine—more out of principle ("gender is a social construction!") than what felt right to my personal identity. Somehow, I saw no irony in any of this.

I went on to attend my first year of college and declare a Gender Studies major. I loved my classes but pointedly enrolled in those that explored gender or sexuality broadly rather than so-called "women's issues." My heroes at the time were homogenous—a list of quirky white men. I had developed an essentialist talking point that would make my high-school-self and current-self alike cringe for anyone who asked me how I was liking college: "It's going well, but sometimes I miss men. I feel like they bring a sense of levity to spaces that I miss." Perhaps most ironically, it wasn't until I enrolled in a summer class—not at Wellesley but at my local community college—that I recognized my problem for what it was—internalized sexism.

In pursuit of minimizing my course load senior spring, I reluctantly registered for a women's literature course offered in the summer at my local community college. True to character, I wasn't interested in reading about Virginia Woolf's concerns, and anyway, I hated analyzing literature (or so I thought, based on my experiences in high school.)

Yet, it was the only summer class that could count towards my Gender Studies degree back at Wellesley, so enroll I did.

It would be an understatement to describe this class as anything short of a revelation. In the pages of the texts I was assigned, I encountered women writing cleverly and artfully about how women have been systematically underrepresented in history and the literary canon. "Hmm. That makes sense," I thought, recalling the "classic" literary works I had been assigned in high school: Shakespeare, Joyce, Hemmingway, Conrad. I read accounts by women of how the world turns women against one another. I recalled those women who had insisted to me that a campus full of women could only spell drama and thought, "Wow. It's true." Other poets and authors wrote about experiencing a bodily self-consciousness in female forms that I found uncomfortably familiar—because, I realized, I recognized it in myself.

It was time to take a good, hard look at my innermost attitudes. I suddenly realized that I needed to reckon with the many ways I had swallowed the harmful message that I, like so many people, had been hammered with from as soon as I could consume media: women and girls are less interesting, less fun, less funny, more superficial, and higher maintenance than men and boys. (And, I now realized, it was no wonder I saw things this way, having encountered relatively few women-centered perspectives or heroines in my formative years.)

Once I recognized my internalized sexism, I could see my behaviors and attitudes in recent years aligning to confirm it in ways that seemed obvious in hindsight. While on some level I did respect and value women, I had ignorantly and hastily written off certain aspects of femininity as false or detrimental and worked to neutralize my own identity as a woman in any way I could. I would be a mother...of sons. I would be a woman...but a pragmatic, androgynous, gay, and unfussy one. I had been operating from a place where I felt women were, at best, "the same" as men, and thus deserved no special attention. This was a mighty act of cognitive dissonance to be certain, as I sought out an institution the very purpose of which was for women to receive special attention that they had historically been denied. I am grateful that the superficial understanding of feminism I embraced as a teenager at least managed to land me where it did.

Fortunately, once I returned to Wellesley, I had only to look around me to see beyond the sexist messages I now recognized I had absorbed. I was surrounded by brilliant, fun, and funny women, doing and being and creating amazing things. Being in this environment helped me to deeply reflect upon and come to genuinely value my identity as a woman—and subsequently, to embrace to some of the self-expression I had previously curtailed in effort to reject elements of my femininity.

I made the most of my last year in this incredible space created for women, recognizing anew how fortunate I was to have this opportunity—one I would wish everyone could experience for an identity important to them.

Now, when I encounter women saying things like, "Women are so catty!" I grit my teeth and take a deep breath, remembering how and why, not long ago, I myself bought into messages that were not so different. Challenging years, even decades, of internalized messages like this to help people see beyond them is a Herculean task that will never be achieved in one conversation. Instead, I do my best to exercise patience, while challenging these notions with truths from my experience. "That's interesting. People often hold that stereotype, but I spent four years surrounded by women, and they were some of the best of my life."

These days, I make a concerted effort to ensure that the media I consume is at least somewhat balanced in the perspectives it highlights and work actively to recognize inspiring women and girls. If and when I have children, regardless of their gender identity, I will prioritize instilling in them a deep respect for women—by highlighting diverse heroines throughout history and in current events, by exposing them to media that centers and celebrates women, and by sharing examples of harmful messages they may encounter about women and girls in the world. I believe that actively and regularly taking steps to counter negative biases embraced by our culture and our media is our only hope of pre-empting or interrupting our internalizations of them.

> *I believe that actively and regularly taking steps to counter negative biases embraced by our culture and our media is our only hope of pre-empting or interrupting our internalizations of them.*

Reflection Activity

Consider:
- In what ways might you be internalizing biases or messages about identities of which you are proud and/or actively advocate?
- What experiences have led to you becoming more aware of the ways in which you internalize bias and oppression?
- What are you doing to counter biases you and people you care about may be internalizing?

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On Being an "Angry Black Woman"

By Brittany J. Harris, Vice President, Learning and Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.

"The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." Malcolm X quoted these words in 1962. As a Black woman, I would suggest they still resonate today. There is no shortage of data points, studies, or anecdotal observations that substantiate the ways in which Black women continue to experience the compounding effects of racism and sexism in their workplaces, communities, and daily lives.

Whether it's experiencing persistent pay inequities all the while maintaining the role as 'breadwinners' and primary caretakers for our families; being at greater risk for maternal mortality and disparities in healthcare— despite how much you think 'you've made it' up the socioeconomic ladder; navigating the daily microaggressions in the workplace that suggest all of who we are might be too much or not enough; or the sickening reality that even in our youth, we're seen as less innocent, less deserving of protection and care—one would be hard pressed not to find some truth in Malcolm X's quote. For those reasons, alone, I'd venture to say that Black women have quite a bit to be angry about.

Yet, and still, the "Angry Black Woman" narrative is one that is often used to stigmatize and undermine black women who choose to challenge the racism and sexism they experience, or who dare to affirm who they are and what they deserve.

The "Angry Black Woman" narrative essentially characterizes Black women's anger as irrational, uncalled for, an overaction, and a deviation from what is required to be seemingly 'respectable'—particularly in the eyes of white people. Black women must 'take the high road'—or more eloquently put, 'go high' even when 'they' go low. We are enculturated to suppress our true, authentic feelings out of fear or risk of disturbing the comfortability of white people. This dynamic in and of itself is a form of oppression—one that I too, have experienced and even internalized.

In those environments where I was the 'only,' I struggled with balancing what it meant to advocate for myself in a context where that advocacy could be misinterpreted as confrontational or invalid. "Brittany, If you speak up for yourself, they may think you're being radical. It's not worth it." I recall learning to adapt my direct and expressive communication style as a survival (thriving) mechanism to avoid being interpreted as 'sassy,' aggressive or intimidating. "Brittany, you don't want them to think you're ghetto or unprofessional—you're a different kinda black."

When experiencing the ever present, 'papercut-like' nature of racial microaggressions, I remember feeling choked up, yet resisting the urge to share my truth or engage out of fear of making them [white people] feel bad. "Brittany, they probably didn't mean it that way. If you share how you feel, they might get offended." And even today, when I find myself engaged in dialogue around sexism and misogyny within the Black community, there's sometimes this subtle expectation to prioritize blackness over womaness—to subdue my truth, feelings, and pain in service of a much greater 'cause.' "Brittany, don't be too critical of our own. It doesn't help our community."

I find it fascinating how I've essentially learned (internalized) that suppressing my feelings, truth, and anger (despite how much studies show this can be a detriment to my health) is worth not being characterized as or associated with being an "Angry Black Woman." What's so wrong with being an Angry Black Woman? Anger is a very real and valid feeling. It is (or should be) an acceptable response to mistreatment and discrimination. It has been proven to be a powerful channel for action, change, and impact. Angry Black Women disrupt and dismantle systems. Angry Black Women affirm their truth and amplify the experiences and truths of others. Angry Black Women show up and do the work—all the while living through and managing the toll of the trauma and pain they experience. Angry Black Women are Strong Black Women—and that is a narrative I strive to reconcile and internalize every day.

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> *The "Angry Black Woman" narrative essentially characterizes Black women's anger as irrational, uncalled for, an overaction, and a deviation from what is required to be seemingly 'respectable'—particularly in the eyes of white people.*

Reflection Activity

Consider Brittany's reflection on internalizing and reconciling the 'Angry Black Women' narrative:

- In what ways do your identities intersect to create a unique experience?
- How have your intersecting or compounded subordinated group identities influenced how you see yourself?
- How have your intersecting or compounded identities manifested into forms of internalized oppression?
- In what ways can you reconcile or reframe biases or narratives you've internalized about your identity groups to affirm your identity and validate your experiences (e.g. "Angry Black Women are Strong Black Women.")?

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Whiteness and Working Ourselves to Death

By Travis Jones, Principal Strategist, The Winters Group, Inc.

Dave Portnoy, the founder of the sports blog Barstool, made national headlines from his response to rumors of his staff forming a union, like other media workers have in the recent past. It's no secret that union membership has reached a historical low in this country, but the cause of the decline is equally unsurprising; it can be summed up from a tweet from Portnoy to his workers: "Unions are for pu%*#s. At least in our world." As Eddie Kim argues, weaponizing masculinity to block fights for workers' rights is a long American tradition.

Of course, bosses using attacks on the worn-out stereotypes of toxic masculinity only works in industries where these ideals are treasured. These strategies prove most effective where people don't have much more to their identities than their masculinity or their whiteness; for many white working–class men, that's all they have to show for. Unless things change for these groups of men, they will work themselves and their families to death.

This is at least part of the story of Jonathan Metzls's new book, Dying of Whiteness, where he shows empirically how white working–class men are dying at rates much higher than their demographic has ever experienced in this country. In addition to economic changes that have affected the white working class, it is their clinging to identities of "tough," independent workers that contributes to their refusal to support policies that would help them materially. Instead they are opting to support anyone who will tell them that they're still strong and that their problems are someone else's fault—even as they take their dying breaths.

In fact, Metzl interviews white men who say they would rather die (literally) than support policies from working class people of color. Now that's identity politics.

This commitment to whiteness and masculinity doesn't just shape white men's politics, but their personal relationships as well. Sociologists have shown that straight white men have fewer close friendships compared to any other male racial/ethnic group. It doesn't take a giant leap of logic to assume this might have something to do with their higher rates of suicide and self-destructive use of drugs like meth. It is the combination of whiteness—as superiority—and working class—as resilience—that creates this perfect storm. In fact, the combination of these two identities is what W. E. B. DuBois called the "great loophole" stopping poor whites from joining poor blacks in solidarity over a 100 years ago. The great trade-off between loving and fighting for yourself and others, for the sense that you are strong and resilient in the face of challenges is "coming home to roost" for white men—and they're taking it out on everyone else.

I know how real the appeal of these false promises can be from my own life experience. From as long as I can remember, I was taught that the most important thing about work is working harder than the next guy (and real work was always "guy work"). Growing up in the rural South, it was always a badge of honor to brag about how many hour you'd worked in a week. I still feel the push and pull of these embedded values today. It wasn't until I entered more liberal spaces that I saw that this appeal to amount of hours worked had a class "layer" to it.

I never heard anyone I grew up with strategizing, like entrepreneur Tim Ferris, about how to only work 4-hours a week, or like the FIRE (Financial Independence and early Retirement)community's efforts to get out of working as quickly and early as possible.

At the root of many anti-work movements is a correct assessment of America's unhealthy relationship to work, but we should all be suspicious when bosses want their workers to love work more than they love themselves. Until the white working-class learns to value themselves for identities other than their whiteness or masculinity, they will continue to work themselves to death—and the rest of us will suffer the residual consequences.

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Reflection Activity

Consider Travis' reflection on whiteness and masculinity:
- What are your initial thoughts and reactions?
- What are some values associated with or influenced by aspects of your identity?
- How might these values influence how you see yourself and others?

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What We've Learned

By Brittany J. Harris, Vice President, Learning and Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.

I consider myself pretty introspective and reflective. Those close to me might characterize me as an 'overthinker.' I wear it like a badge of honor. ☺I have found that some of my most impactful learnings about myself (and others) have come as a result of me setting aside time to reflect, process, and just think. Perhaps this has less to do with my profession as a DEI practitioner and more to do with my personal goal of just being a 'good human.' We use a quote often in our work that gets to the power of reflecting—as abstract as it may be— "We don't learn from our experiences. We learn from reflecting on our experiences." The power in reflection—pausing to deeply understand what messages we've learned and internalized, from whence they've come and the ways in which it all shows up in how we live in and experience the world—was more than evident in this series.

Throughout this guide, our team has demystified internalized oppression. A dynamic that is often less spoken of (in my experience) in diversity and inclusion work. Certainly, as D&I work has begun to intersect more with social justice and equity work, we've began to underscore the role of systems, identity, power, and privilege, particularly the systemic (social outcomes) and interpersonal (our interactions with others) impact. The intrapersonal—how we understand ourselves—is just as critical, if not more, to our work. Our work around internalized oppression is an extension of that.

We define internalized oppression as the acceptance and adoption of negative messages, subordinating norms and biases, and forms of discrimination that have historically been used to marginalize the groups to which we belong. These messages, norms, and biases are typically created by those 'in power' and are broadly perpetuated in social systems (criminal justice, education, employment, media, etc.). These messages, norms, and biases are part of the cyclical and generational impact of oppression and can be dangerous—as they can easily 'go under the radar,' as 'how things are' because 'that's just how it's been.'

Internalized oppression can manifest as an unlikely accomplice to much broader systems of power and privilege and be used to validate them.
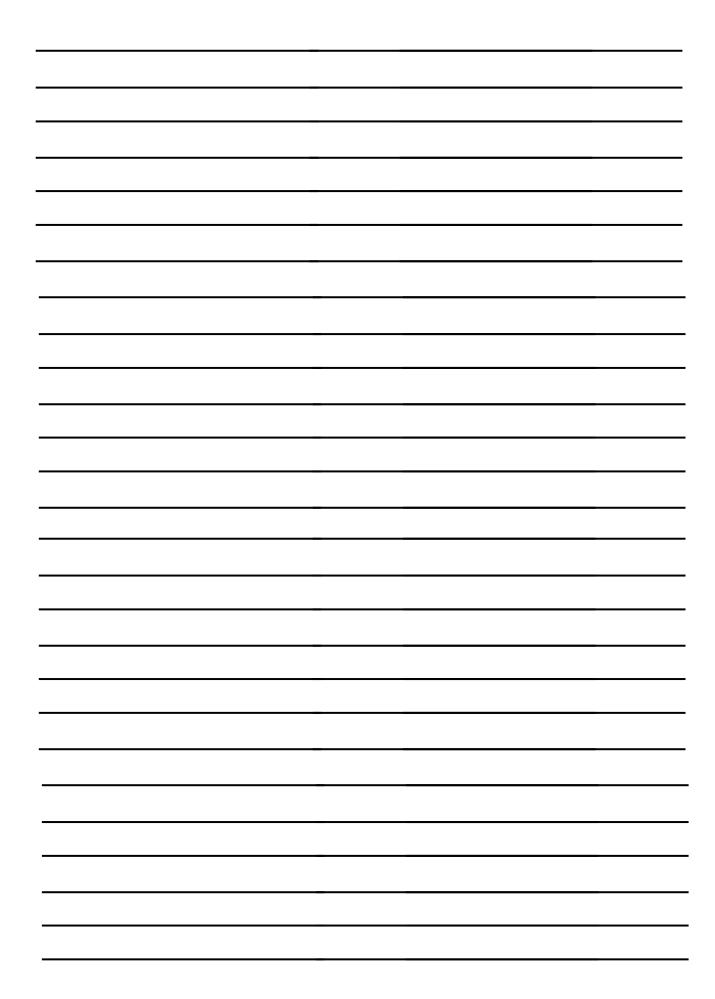
In a powerful reflection, Mary-Frances Winters recounted the pain of internalized oppression and messages she'd learned about race and color in childhood. Thamara Subramanian reflected on the ways in which internalizing the "Model Minority Myth" not only undermined the experiences and humanity of other racial minorities, but also perpetuated a harmful self-concept. Leigh Morrison shared more about the ways in which she had to unlearn and relearn gender norms and problematic narratives associated with femininity and womanhood—even as a student at a women's college. I shared my experience as a Black woman who's internalized and is constantly reconciling the "Angry Black Woman" narrative that has been used to undermine Black women's experiences and truths. Finally, Travis Jones shared more on the ways in which the white working class' internalization of toxic forms of individualism and masculinity has been to their detriment. As a result of this work, we've learned so much about ourselves and each other. Our hope is that you've also used our stories to begin your own journey of greater self-reflection and understanding.

It shouldn't stop here though. We must constantly interrogate and be critical of who we are, what we've learned, and how it all shows up—in our interactions and behaviors; in the policies and practices we ideate and perpetuate; in the norms we accept as fair, true, or right.

Consider these questions to make the connections:

- In what ways has what you've learned about yourself impacted who you see as 'professional' or not? Worthy of being 'seen' or 'heard' or not?
- What messages have influenced who you deem 'leadership material' or not? Who deserves 'a seat at the table' or not?
- What has influenced how you perceive some identity groups over others (including your own)?
- In what ways have you accepted standards or norms that undermine who you are or what makes you unique?
- To what extent have you needed to cover or assimilate—or even expected others to—as a result of cultural norms that suggested 'who you are' would not belong?
- In what ways has how you see yourself perpetuated the same systems of oppression and inequity that you seek to disrupt and dismantle?

These are all questions that require reflection if we strive to be our best and most effective selves in the work around equity, justice, and inclusion.

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A Commitment to Live Inclusively®

I commit to be intentional in living inclusively.

I commit to spending more time getting to know myself and understanding my culture. It is in understanding myself, that I am better positioned to understand others. I will acknowledge that I don't know what I don't know, but I will not use what is unconscious as an excuse.

I will be intentional in exposing myself to difference. If I don't know, I will ask. If I am asked, I will assume positive intent. Most importantly, I will accept my responsibility in increasing my own knowledge and understanding.

I commit to speaking up and speaking out, even when I am not directly impacted, for there is no such thing as neutrality in the quest for equity, justice, and inclusion.

I will strive to accept, and not just tolerate; respect, even if I don't agree; and be curious, not judgmental. I commit to pausing and listening. I will be empathetic to the experiences and perspectives of my "others." I will use my privilege positively, and get comfortable with my own discomfort.

I commit to knowing, getting, and doing better than I did yesterday—keeping in mind my commitment to live inclusively is a journey, not a destination.

Written by: Brittany J. Harris, Vice-President, Learning & Innovation, The Winters Group, Inc.

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