

**MELANIE JOY, PhD**

Bestselling author of  
*Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*



# POWERARCHY

**Understanding the  
Psychology of Oppression for  
Social Transformation**

# Powerarchy

*This page intentionally left blank*



# Powerarchy



**Understanding the Psychology of  
Oppression for Social Transformation**

MELANIE JOY, PhD



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

# Powerarchy

Copyright © 2019 by Melanie Joy

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921



Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the “Special Sales Department” at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

Distributed to the U.S. trade and internationally by Penguin Random House Publisher Services.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## First Edition

Hardcover print edition ISBN 978-1-5230-8666-5

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8667-2

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-5230-8668-9

Digital audio ISBN 978-1-5230-8670-2

2019-1

Production manager: Susan Geraghty. Cover and interior design: Paula Goldstein. Composition: Westchester Publishing Services. Copyeditor: Michele D. Jones. Proofreader: Cathy Mallon. Indexer: Rebecca Plunkett. Author photo: Matthias Schillig.

*For each of you who is helping to create a more relational world, whether you're working quietly in the background or marching on the front lines. Thank you.*

*This page intentionally left blank*



# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<b>1 Oppression: A Relational Dysfunction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2 The Process of Power</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3 Systems of Power</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4 Distortions and Power</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>5 Narratives of Power</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>6 The Power of Privilege</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>7 Transforming Power</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>8 Beyond Oppression</b>	<b>118</b>
...	
Notes	139
Glossary	171
Acknowledgments	181
Index	183
About the Author	195



*This page intentionally left blank*

# Powerarchy

*This page intentionally left blank*



## INTRODUCTION

*If you find the mirror of the heart dull, the rust has not been cleared from its face.*

—RUMI

I was four years old when I began the journey that led to the writing of this book. It was a hot summer day, and I was with my parents on my father's fishing boat, my favorite place in the world to be. And then I caught my first fish.

My parents clapped and laughed and told me how proud they were, but I felt confused and distraught. I didn't understand why I couldn't share their happiness; as I watched the fish I'd pulled out of the ocean flop wildly on the floor of the boat gasping for air, all I could feel was sadness. And guilt.

After that day, my father's boat, once the source of my greatest joy, became a trigger for distress. I couldn't bear to see thrashing fish being pulled off hooks and tossed into a bloody bucket to suffocate. And seafood, which had been my favorite cuisine, sickened me to the point where I could no longer eat it without vomiting.

My emotions and body were reacting to a paradox that my young brain wasn't developed enough to understand. I couldn't reconcile how caring people—my own parents nonetheless—could harm others and neither see nor feel troubled by this contradiction. My parents instilled in me a strong commitment to practicing the Golden Rule—to treating others the way I'd want to be treated if I were in their position. So did my teachers, the ministers at our church, and nearly every adult who influenced my development. Yet it seemed that everywhere I turned, this supposedly highest principle was being violated, and nobody was the least bit concerned.

Whether it was my father killing fish for enjoyment, movies depicting men subduing emotionally distraught women by slapping them across the face (it was the 1960s, after all), or children bullying each other on the playground in plain sight of unconcerned teachers, the relational paradox I was witnessing was the same. The Golden Rule, a principle meant to guide the way we relate to others, was as disregarded as it was esteemed—and, most notably, this contradiction was utterly invisible.

It was more than two decades later that I was finally able to comprehend and articulate this relational paradox, a phenomenon I'd become increasingly sensitized to over the years. I had become deeply concerned with social injustices, and I found myself confounded by the dysfunctional state of humanity that not only allowed for but perpetrated widespread suffering. What, I wondered, makes people turn away from—rather than challenge—atrocities? Why do some of the same people who stand on the streets demonstrating for human rights mistreat members of their own families? Why do those who claim to want a society based on the values of compassion and justice nevertheless vote and act against these values?

The answers to these questions came to me after another incident involving an animal, this time in the form of a hamburger. I was twenty-three years old, and I'd recently eaten a beef patty that was contaminated with campylobacter (the “salmonella” of the red-meat world). I wound up hospitalized and on intravenous antibiotics, and after that experience I found myself too disgusted to eat meat again.

In the process of learning about my new, vegetarian diet, I stumbled upon information about animal agriculture. What I learned shocked and horrified me. The extent of the needless suffering endured by billions of nonhuman animals and the devastation to the environment were almost incomprehensible. But what disturbed me perhaps even more was that nobody I talked to about what I'd learned was willing to hear what I had to say. Their responses were nearly always along the lines of “Don't tell me that;

you'll ruin my meal," or they'd call me a radical vegetarian hippie propagandist. And these were my friends and family—conscientious, rational people who were committed to helping create a more just and compassionate world and who genuinely cared about animals.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE

Wanting to understand what it was that caused people to harbor relationally contradictory attitudes and behaviors—what enabled the relational paradox I first observed when I killed the fish—I enrolled in a doctoral program in psychology, where I studied the psychology of violence and nonviolence. What, I asked, enabled caring people to participate in, or otherwise support, practices that harm others, be they human or nonhuman beings? And what, then, could help shift this psychological orientation?

I narrowed the focus of my research to examine a specific expression of the relational paradox: the psychosociology of eating animals, a phenomenon I named *carnism*. Seeking to understand how people who care about the well-being of nonhuman animals nevertheless consume (or kill) them, I conducted interviews and surveys, and coded and analyzed responses. I concluded that eating (certain) animals results from extensive social and psychological conditioning that causes naturally empathic and rational people to distort their perceptions and block their empathy so that they act against their values of compassion and justice without fully realizing what they're doing. In other words, carnism teaches us to violate the Golden Rule without knowing or caring that we're doing so.

What I took away from my research was not simply the discovery of carnism but of how, specifically, violent or oppressive ideologies are structured. I had deconstructed the carnistic system, identifying and articulating the specific social and psychological defense mechanisms that keep it intact. In the process, I realized that

these same mechanisms exist in all oppressive systems. In other words, the same psychological (and social) mechanisms that enable us to harm nonhumans enable us to harm humans.

My theory of carnism became popularized through my book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. My hope was that the book would not only invite nonvegans to reflect on their relationship with farmed animals but also encourage all people, including vegans, to recognize how various oppressive systems influence the way they relate to others. To some extent, my hope was fulfilled; a number of people shared with me that they found the book applicable across issues and that they had become more conscientious about myriad forms of oppression.

## **COMPARTMENTALIZING “ISMS” AND RELATIONAL DIMENSIONS**

But humans have a remarkable ability to compartmentalize, and vegans are no exception. Just as I was met with resistance by my socially progressive, meat-eating family and friends to my attempts to raise awareness of carnism, I found that a number of vegans reacted defensively to my attempts to raise awareness of feminism, racism, and other oppressions not involving nonhuman animals. I'd point out that, although women make up about 80 percent of the vegan movement, the majority of its leaders are men. I'd also note that vegan outreach doesn't always reflect the experiences and needs of people of color (something vegans of color have been saying for some time),<sup>1</sup> only to have my comments largely disregarded and sometimes argued against—by people who admittedly had little or no literacy, or awareness, around the issues I was raising.

My experience talking about social justice among some vegan advocates paralleled that of my experiences talking about veganism among social justice advocates. It became clear to me that, more often than not, people would step outside of one “ism” only to land

(or, rather, remain) in others, while believing they'd somehow extricated themselves from all “isms.”

I noticed this same phenomenon occurring across the three dimensions in which people relate: collective/social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (within and toward oneself). People tend to assume that awareness and transformation in one dimension automatically translate to awareness and transformation in all dimensions. Yet, more often than not, people step out of oppressive or abusive<sup>2</sup> dynamics in one dimension only to stay stuck in such dynamics in one or both of the others. For example, people who are actively working toward more compassionate and just social policies may nevertheless be verbally abusive to those they disagree with, carrying out the same behaviors in the interpersonal dimension that they are challenging in the social dimension.<sup>3</sup>

I realized that it was time for an analysis that seeks to uncover the common denominator among all forms and expressions of oppression: What is the “metasystem,” as it were, that envelops all oppressive systems and informs all **relational dimensions**? How do we know we're in it? How does it influence the way we relate to our world, others, and ourselves? And, most important, what can we do to step out of it—or, perhaps more accurately, change our relationship with it?

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is the result of my search for answers to the aforementioned questions. In this book, I present a theoretical framework, a model, for helping to understand the nature and structure of oppression from a relational perspective. This framework is based in part on the empirical research I conducted for my doctoral dissertation, as well as on extensions of that analysis that I developed in the following years. But the framework extends well beyond my analysis of carnism. I have synthesized ideas from my work as a psychologist, social justice advocate, relationship specialist, and lecturer



in psychological trauma and addictions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the ideas in this book have been largely informed by the countless scholars and advocates whose work has been invaluable in illuminating paths to understanding oppression through the fog that obscures it.<sup>5</sup> I draw heavily on the cutting-edge work that informs Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT), developed in large part by Jean Baker Miller, Judith V. Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver from the Wellesley College Stone Center, expanding that theory to include relationships beyond only those between and among humans, and suggesting a model and structure with which to understand all nonrelational systems.

The model I present here is explanatory, in that it offers an explanation of oppression that is intended to enrich existing conversations and encourage further discussion and investigation. This book is not meant to be the primer for transforming oppression, nor is it meant to oversimplify what is clearly a complex problem. Rather, my hope is that the model I present will simply provide a way of understanding oppression that may be helpful as an addition to existing works in this area, an apparatus to include in the existing toolkit of approaches to social transformation, for those for whom it seems useful. (I use examples throughout this book to help clarify the concepts presented. A number of these examples are about male privilege, which is a reflection of my personal experience: I am a former lecturer on feminism and a woman. This focus is not meant to minimize other forms of privilege—many of which I discuss throughout the book—or to imply that males are not also harmed by male privilege and patriarchy, an issue I discuss in upcoming chapters.)

In this book, I propose that there is an overarching belief system that informs all oppressive systems, which I call **powerarchy**.<sup>6</sup> Powerarchy is a nonrelational system that is organized around the belief in a **hierarchy of moral worth**—that some individuals or groups are more worthy of moral consideration than others—and that is structured to maintain unjust power imbalances. Powerarchy reflects and reinforces relational dysfunction—nonrelational power

dynamics<sup>7</sup> that violate integrity and harm dignity. Powerarchy exists as a metasystem, as the ethos, or overarching system, that informs oppressive systems in general. It also exists on more discernible levels: powerarchies can be social systems, such as racism and sexism, or interpersonal systems, such as an abusive relationship; and powerarchy informs how we relate to ourselves. In this book, I present an analysis of powerarchy, examining the key psychological and social structures that maintain the system, as well as ways to work toward transformation.

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is written with the assumption that readers accept that oppression is a bona fide phenomenon. It is not written for those who are skeptical about the existence of social power imbalances or privileges—both of which are well-documented phenomena.<sup>8</sup> I do not seek to convince readers that, for example, people of color experience widespread injustices or that women have significantly less social power than men. Those who do not have at least some literacy around privilege and oppression will likely be resistant to the ideas presented here, as these ideas build on an understanding of oppressive phenomena, rather than comprehensively explain them. This book is for readers who are concerned about oppression and supportive of progressive social transformation. This book may also appeal to those who wish to understand their experience of power in order to improve their personal lives and relationships.

I believe that a key obstacle to bringing about social transformation swiftly is the lack of a comprehensive, relational framework with which to understand oppression. I believe that the common tendency to view oppressions reductively—as more distinct from one another than they are, and as disconnected across the three relational dimensions of our lives—is in large part due to the fact that we have not fully identified a key common denominator that underlies all forms of oppression.

I wrote this book for those who are doing the vitally important work of helping create a more just and compassionate world. This work is urgent, and I am humbled and inspired by the dedication, effectiveness, and brilliance of the many people who are helping create a better planet for us all. I hope this book will make a contribution to those efforts.



## CHAPTER 1

# Oppression

## A Relational Dysfunction

*If we don't get to the root of oppressive behavior, then we risk reproducing the oppressive framework in our own liberation movements.*

—SYL KO

**O**ppression—the unjust allocation and use of power—is arguably the single greatest cause of human and nonhuman suffering and of some of the most perilous environmental problems our planet has ever known.<sup>1</sup> The countless manifestations of oppression range from the seemingly benign to the catastrophic, from the micro (how we treat individuals) to the macro (how we operate as a collective). Rape, war, genocide, child abuse, poverty, environmental degradation, factory farming, terrorism, racism, patriarchy—oppression is manifested in any behavior or system that mirrors and supports the exercising of unjust power and control over another or others.<sup>2</sup> And oppressive behaviors, as well as the attitudes that accompany them, are self-reinforcing: oppression begets oppression, in a feedback loop. So ending oppression—intercepting and transforming the deeply ingrained patterns of thinking and behaving that form the foundation of global suffering and destruction—is arguably the single most important undertaking of our time.