

COMPETITION

JoAnn Costello

Beth Roy

Claude Steiner

Internalized Oppression (as we have shown in the previous chapter) is a process by which we incorporate a body of ideas that cruelly inform our picture of ourselves and of the world. In the voice of the Pig, which is the form such messages take as they actually address each of us, we are told how to behave, what to feel, when we are good and bad. The Pig carries with it a set of moral injunctions about right and wrong, and a powerful set of accusations about those who digress.

The content of that morality differs greatly from time to time and place to place. The ideas pressed by the Pig have an ideological function. Every society selects for certain attitudes, by the very nature of its organization, as well as through its culture. In an agricultural community, for instance, characteristics of patience, endurance and quietness are highly useful. Without them, farmers would become restive, dissatisfied with the isolation of rural living and with the need to accommodate the rhythms of nature. In an industrial, urban, capitalist society, other values are important: ambition, manual dexterity, an impatience to succeed, and so on. Because the sum total of our thoughts and attitudes perform a function in socializing individuals to particular political forms, the body of our Internalized Oppression is ideological. That is to say, it is no accident that we hold the particular beliefs and have the precise attitudes and values that we do: they serve to keep us doing the things our social order requires us to do.

In capitalist society, the leading ideological edge of Internalized Oppression is *individualism* — the set of beliefs which places the individual above the collective. Behavior inspired by individualism takes a certain form as well, and that form is *competition*.

Together, individualism and competition represent the special way our Internalized Oppression is organized, and the vehicle for its perpetuation.

INDIVIDUALISM

Individualism gives people the impression that when they achieve something it is on their own and without the help of others and that when they fail it is, once again, all their own doing. Belief in the value of individualism obscures any understanding of the way in which human beings affect each other in both good and bad ways; thus it completely mystifies both oppression and cooperation. Individualism results in the isolation of human beings from each other so that they cannot band together against the well-organized oppressive forces that exploit them.

Individualism makes people easily influenced and also easily targeted when they step out of line and begin to want to remedy their oppression in an individual fashion. Finally, individualism prevents people from validating their growing awareness of oppression with each other. Healthy paranoid suspicions that may accompany demystification of oppression are invalidated, and people are reduced to schizophrenia, each person in her individual, impotent, paranoid system.

Individualism as a way of relating to other human beings, while highly touted, can, in fact, be a most self-destructive form of behavior. We do not mean to suggest that individuality, individual action or self-centered behavior is invariably wrong. It is clear that some individuals and their individual actions have been of ultimate benefit to themselves and others. In fact, it is the clearly positive individual actions of certain scientists or politicians that are

used by our educational institutions as showcases to highlight the value of individuality. But these examples are distortions and exaggerations of its value, for the purpose of instilling individualism and competitiveness in the young. Every individual “achiever” is connected by a thousand threads to others — colleagues and co-workers, teachers and students, families and friends — and all contribute to the achievement.

COMPETITIVENESS

Individualism goes hand in hand with competitiveness. Since we stand or fall strictly on our individual efforts, it follows that we must think of everyone around us as individuals equally invested in succeeding and, in the mad scramble to the top, also necessarily invested in achieving superiority or one-up status to us. Being one-down is intolerable; the only alternative in our society is to try to stay one-up. Equality is not comprehended by us and often not even considered. Competitiveness is trained into human beings from early in life in our culture. Yet, not all human beings are bred into competitive styles of life, and there are some societies, some American Indians for instance, for whom competitiveness is not seen as a positive trait. In an individualistic, competitive society a person who is not highly competitive cannot keep up and becomes chronically one-down and eventually highly alienated. Therefore, competitiveness persists in appearing to be a good trait, because it is so difficult in our society to achieve well-being without having very strong competitive skills.

Competition consists of an internal process of thought, a feeling, and an external action. By *competitiveness*, we mean an internal, two-step process: first comparing oneself with another person, and second assigning ranks (he is best, I am better, she is worst.) The feelings which coincide with that process are varied, and we'll say more about them later. *To compete* is to take any action designed to win something at the expense of others. The prize may be material, such as food, a job, a prize, etc., or something interactional, such as attention, love, recognition — strokes in general. Competition occurs when the rewards are, or appear to be, in scarcity so that success for some means loss for others. (Some writers argue that competition can occur even without scarcity; we'll return to this point below.)

To be against competition is controversial in twentieth century America. Competition is what makes things work, what makes people valuable, what creates wealth, the source of all good things, according to the ideology of our society. However strongly we may believe that competition is a major source of difficulties in our lives, we must also acknowledge that there is a grain of truth to what is said in favor of it. Historically, it was the mechanism by which early capitalism supplanted feudalism, a progressive change. In its day, economic competition had a useful function, which, however, in its very nature, undid itself. As certain firms, originally competing in a free market, succeeded, economic (and with it political) power passed into fewer and fewer hands, resulting eventually in the monopoly capitalism we know today.

For a period of time in the 1960s and '70s, competition came under serious critical scrutiny by people on the left and those engaged in experiments with alternative lifestyles. Communes bloomed; hierarchic organizations were reorganized as collectives. Competitive sports were contrasted with cooperative games. Feminist redefinitions of intimacy and friendship highlighted the destructive effects of competition in personal relationships. Much of the pro-cooperation stance of Radical Psychiatry evolved in the context of this broad-based and progressive critique.

More recently, however, the pendulum has swung again, and many of the cooperative experiments of the previous decade have been abandoned in favor of a “new” spirit of competitiveness. Burned out by endless competitive struggles in “cooperative” settings, where old habits, lack of skills and a naive misunderstanding of the realities of power too often swamped ideals, many ex-counter-culture participants re-evaluated both the practicality of cooperation and its desirability. Often people left the fray, feeling discouraged, worn-out and cynical.

Is competition all bad, they asked? Aren't the experiences of exhilaration, of competency and — let's face it — pride in winning, legitimate highs? Women began to notice that they were working harder at the cooperation game than men seemed to be. As their brothers embarked on the scramble to the top, they found themselves left behind in non-

competitive jobs. Let's join the race, said a new breed of feminists. Cooperation is another ploy to keep us from getting our just rewards.¹

These arguments in favor of competition deserve careful attention.² Indeed, in a competitive setting, to cooperate unilaterally is a contradiction in terms. As we have said, success in a competitive society does demand competitive skills. If you run the race and hope to win, you'd better have trained hard, and be unconfused about *wanting* to win.

To compete, then, may be a wise and justifiable choice. But too often we compete, psychologically and in actions, when we have not chosen to do so. We compete, at times, because we don't know what else to do, or because the only alternative we see is to drop out. Competition becomes the mode in personal relationships, often against our best intentions.

Sometimes we compete because we want to be wholly and passionately engaged in an activity. Competition can indeed “feel good”: it energizes us, captures our interest, bonds us with others on our team, and makes a bond of a negative sort with those we battle against. In our alienated lives, it is hard indeed to find pursuits that are so compelling. Lacking social movements, cut off from art and learning and growth in our daily lives, sidetracked from intimacy by the battle of the sexes, we turn to competitive endeavors to find that experience of being fully alive. The catch is that intense joyfulness usually comes with winning, and most of us lose most of the time. Even when we do win, we lose, for we are denied another whole set of intensely human experiences: pleasure in the process rather than the end, room to experiment, the joy of appreciating varieties of means, of reveling in the differences among us which are squeezed away in the linear act of ranking winners against losers, best against worst.

Some writers distinguish two different situations denoted by the word competition.³ In both, winning is the objective. But in one model, more than one winner is theoretically possible. In fact, everybody could potentially win. A race is one example of this form of competition. Theoretically, if eight runners compete, all could cross the winning line together. In baseball, however, the game goes on and on until one team wins. Tennis matches cannot end in a tie. A college professor who grades “on a curve” can award only a finite (usually very small) number of A's, even if everyone does substantially as well as everybody else; not everyone can excel, by definition.

In the first model, people often experience the exhilaration of performing together with a competitor. Indeed, the word “competition” comes from the Latin *competere*, which is often translated “to run alongside.” To pace yourself against a comrade can encourage you to do your best, perhaps even to exceed what you thought your best was. It may be a constructive and inspirational experience.

But in fact, most competition in our society is of the scarcity category typified by many sports. It is this form of competition, where people are not pacing each other but rather ranking themselves, that is most at issue, because it is this type of ranking, which demands that the success of one necessarily mean the failure of others, that invades our hearts and psyches and drives us to distraction. So intricately is scarcity-based competition entangled in our psychology that even when we do “run alongside” each other, we very often find ourselves vying to win nonetheless. The distinction between these two models is, therefore, more interesting theoretically than it is useful in practice.

Win/lose competitiveness is based on the premise that there is not enough to go around of whatever a person needs, even when in fact there is. If the material needs of human beings are in drastic scarcity, it follows obviously that

¹ On another level, skepticism about cooperation was heightened by Reagan-era attacks on socialism. “It just hasn't worked,” people concluded. “Even the Russians and the Chinese are returning to competitive private enterprise.”

² For a lively and provocative dialogue about these questions, see *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*, edited by Valerie Miner and Helen Longino. Alfred Kohn's thoroughly-documented, highly readable and passionate defense of cooperation, *The Case Against Cooperation*, is also a valuable contribution to the debate.

³ Helen E. Longino, “The Ideology of Competition,” in *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*

competitiveness is the mode for survival. If there is one loaf of bread daily, evenly shared, to feed twenty families, it is pretty clear that all will starve. If a competitive member of this subgroup manages to obtain the whole loaf of bread for his family, that one family will survive while the others will still starve. The net effect of competitiveness in scarcity is actually a positive one for those who compete and win, and even for the survival of the species. But as scarcity becomes a thing of the past, as it is in the United States, competitiveness actually *creates* scarcity and hunger. The hoarding behavior which goes along with competitiveness causes certain people to have a great deal more than they truly need, while large numbers of others, who could be satisfied with the surplus of those few who have, go without. Competitive, hoarding behavior is based on unrealistic anxiety based on fears of scarcity. Oppressive as he is to others, the hoarder is himself oppressed by it.

I (Claude) first experienced the relationship of cooperation to scarcity at a large gathering in the Santa Cruz mountains. One evening everyone sat around in a circle in the center of which was the food for dinner. To my scarcity-oriented eyes it did not appear that there was enough to go around. I was alarmed and scared by the prospects of going hungry and in great conflict about the situation. Portions of food began to be passed around the circle, everyone eating from them as much as they wanted and passing them on. The food circulated over and over, and to my amazement, I found that there was actually enough food to satisfy me quite fully. Yet my experience, because of my scarcity-oriented, competitive and individualist training, was one of anxiety and alarm about not being properly fed. As food went by me I took larger bites than I needed; I felt guilty, but I schemed about ways in which I could make certain kinds of food return to me; I worried as food went around the circle as to whether it would reach me again. I ate more than I needed and was, in short, unable to enjoy the meal because I was so driven by fears of scarcity and feelings of competitiveness.

This anecdote illustrates how we are not only mystified into being competitive and individualistic but into believing that competitiveness and individualism do in some way bring us benefit, when in fact, at this point in our development as human beings, the opposite is often true.

ORIGINS OF COMPETITIVENESS

Competitiveness is taught us from an early age by our parents, but especially in school. Sports, grades, tests, are all training exercises in competitive skills — mock scarcity situations that prepare us for the business world, for the assembly line, for the job market. Competitiveness is taught to boys in its most blatant form; girls are taught to compete in more subtle, psychological forms.

In the nuclear family we are taught early and hard that there is a scarcity of what we need, and that in order to get what we need we must be better than the next guy. The nuclear family (whether single or double parent) is a perfect training ground for this lesson. There is, in fact, not enough of what children need — attention, time, love, respect, stimulation, praise, space, maybe food — to go around. If both parents are scrambling to make it in the difficult, highly competitive job market, they are likely to be worn out by the end of the day. This family exists within a society that promotes scarcity — both real and manipulated. It is an unassailable belief in this society that people deserve to have their needs be met on a system of merit. Those who have an unequal share of the goodies (an empty mansion in Pacific Heights, fantastic job, several wonderful lovers) deserve that share because they are harder working (smarter, prettier, morally superior). Those who sleep on the streets must have brought it on themselves. Had they worked harder, drunk less, prayed more, jogged longer, they, too, would have a bed in which to sleep.

When the world's resources are divided in a way that is grossly unequal, an ideology must exist to rationalize the inequities. Otherwise, people could be expected to fight for their equal share. It is this ideology — that there is not enough of what we need to go around and that it is merit that determines how large one's share should be — that invades our minds and hearts. It pits us against each other in a lifelong rivalry. We compete for the material things we need — jobs, food, safety, as well as for life's essential intangibles — love, appreciation, respect, self-regard. For a young child who has no understanding of the difficulties in her parents' lives, or the causes of lack of attention or

irritability, the message is simple. “I have to be better, louder, smarter, bigger, smaller, prettier so Mommy'll pay attention to me.” This message is amplified by well-meaning parents who want their children to succeed and reward them for being competitive: “You can count to ten and you're only two. Johnny couldn't count until he was three.” “You have such pretty, curly hair. Poor Annie's hair is straight.” “Look how cooperative Katie's being — she shares her toys. You're so selfish.”

THE INTERNAL PROCESS: COMPETITION AS INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

People with a progressive stance vaguely understand that competition is a politically incorrect attitude and the source of a lot of difficulties. But when we attempt to translate these beliefs into everyday experience in this most competitive of societies, we're not exactly sure how it all works and what to do about it. We vaguely know that we're competitive, and have a feeling that it's not right, but that's where we usually stop and we remain confused and without a clear idea of how to act.

As the human facts of competition are put into an ideology that is basically constructed to serve the rich and powerful in society, competition becomes not a matter of “running alongside” anymore but of winning. And in order to win, we have to be better, we have to assess where we stand in relation to others, and we begin to think in terms of what's better and what's worse — good, better or best. We start arranging all the human qualities we consider important (body, intelligence, looks, success, wealth, age, health) along a straight line on which we rank ourselves as being the best, the middle, or the bottom. This ranking does complete violence to reality, since human qualities like intelligence or beauty simply can't realistically be ranked along a linear dimension.

Of course, we never get a chance to rank ourselves as the best unless we win in a competition that pits us against all comers and proves that we have the best body or the strongest biceps or that we are the best salesman or marathon runner. Most people are really not ever going to be the best anyway. So we resign ourselves to being somewhere below the best, and take a position in relation to other people; we do it constantly, day in and day out in all relationships and situations.

What ranking does is reduce the range of human qualities and the options in the areas that we value. Huge numbers of female teenagers worry about nothing but whether their bodies are OK or not, and huge numbers of students in college worry about nothing but whether they're getting A's or are the best in the class. All the other human qualities that are somehow not categorized become irrelevant and get shunted aside.

When we are so heavily inundated by the competitive ideology, every aspect of life becomes a contest; our heads and hearts are never free of the anxious comparisons that fix our place on the endless myriad of scales. We want always to win; we feel usually that we fail.

One-Up, One-Down

We identify ourselves as being one-up or one-down types. Either we feel we are not good enough, or we feel better than others. People who feel one-down are usually very aware of how competitive they are, of how many there are ahead of them and how low down they are on the scale. Being one-down is an experience that's easy to identify: it is often labeled “low self-esteem,” “weak ego,” “not OK.”

In contrast is the competitive experience of feeling one-up, which is often imperceptible to the one who's feeling it. A one-up competitive person assumes he is better: he knows more, is smarter, healthier, more aware, whatever, than the other person. He behaves accordingly, which may mean that he doesn't behave in any perceptible way at all. One-up transactions are noteworthy for their absence of action. The one-up player doesn't listen, fails to pay attention, does

not get uptight. Under all conditions, he remains calm, relaxed, laid back, because he doesn't really care about what anybody else thinks or wants.

In his mind there runs a constant tape: "He really doesn't know. She isn't really smart enough. They don't have enough money, her car isn't really hot, and his body is not as good as mine." To himself, it appears that he's not doing anything competitive; in fact, he's involved in an intense competition in which he always construes himself to be the winner.

We've described people as "one-up" or "one-down," but in fact everyone shares both of these attitudes. Although people may tend to take one position or the other more habitually, everybody is one-up to some and one-down to others when they are in this competitive system. We can always think of people who are better than us and people who are not as good as us, and we relate to those two groups accordingly.

FEELING COMPETITIVE

Each one of these positions has associated with it certain feelings. Being one-down is often accompanied by unpleasant physical sensations, such as a driving, burning energy in the stomach and chest. A person often becomes tense and anxious in the presence of the person to whom he feels one-down, as though in the clutch or grip of a pain that is driving him to be noticed. He feels angry, hurt, or envious, or sometimes he experiences feelings of panic, urgency, shame, fear. The compounding of those emotions coalesces into the one-down feeling of competition.

Being one-up is accompanied by its own set of emotions, this time pleasant, calm, relaxed but also perhaps slightly anxious in the knowledge that this one-up position is tenuous and can be easily lost.

Samuel will usually survey a room to see how he compares with others on a scale of handsomeness. If he thinks he is among the best-looking men, he feels happy, secure, sure of himself and well-disposed toward other people. If he thinks there are several men who are much better-looking than he is, he feels embarrassed, even ashamed. He thinks obsessively about his balding head, and does not speak to anyone in the room.

Nancy, on the other hand, does not notice where she ranks on a beauty scale, but knows exactly how many times she spoke in her history seminar. If she did not speak more often than the other students, or failed to elicit particular praise from the professor, she feels frightened, worried, and disagreeable. She is critical of her colleagues and thinks about dropping out of school. If she is the most vocal in his class, she feels excited and pleased with herself. Obviously, it is fine to be excited and pleased with oneself; however, when these feelings are dependent upon being the best — one-up to all other people — they become hard to obtain.

The particular stimuli that elicit competitive feelings vary from person to person. While Nancy feels especially competitive for respect in an intellectual environment, her brother may want acclaim for his creativity, emotional stability, talent, physical fitness, moral rectitude, long-suffering, wit, wardrobe or charm. Some people even feel competitive about being politically correct or about being non-competitive.

The precise rank (best, better, good, OK, among the majority, not awful) that a person needs to feel pleased with himself also varies. Samuel, mentioned earlier, needs to be "among the best-looking" on an appearance scale. He does not feel competitive about creativity or talent, but has to be the most sexy and "win the girl." Nancy is plagued with the need to be best in everything she does. Consequently, she does not attempt very much, and feels bad about herself most of the time.

COMPETITIVE BEHAVIOR

The desire to be best causes us to rely heavily on power plays to get what we want, because with power plays one can win — or so we think. People who feel one-up in groups often talk too much, interrupt, shout, don't listen, don't address

the previous speaker's point, and assume they have the correct approach and need only explain it so that others will eventually agree. One-down behavior in groups is less obviously competitive. Someone may be silent, whisper to a friend, look bored or disapproving, withhold strokes, read a book, listen but say little, withhold opinions while deciding the other people are loudmouths or stupid, leave the meeting and trash people later. The people who remain will be left with a vague feeling of unease that they can't explain.

Acting competitively happens not only in groups, but also in friendship and couple relationships. It is a stunning blow when two people move from the early days of liquid adoration — when comparisons are awe-inspiring (your eyes are so blue, mine so brown, isn't it wonderful!) — to vicious battles of right/wrong, good/bad, one-up/one-down and “I'll tear out those blue eyes if you don't...” This dramatic alteration makes sense when you consider how early love (idealization, adoration) satisfies a competitively one down person. You are finally number one — the most beloved, beautiful, sexy, witty, pleasing — whichever of your competitive categories you prefer. You're in a heaven of feeling good about yourself because of the reflection in your lover's eyes. Inevitably the idealization of each other runs into contradictions. He is grumpy and uninterested. She's tired and has gas. He gets a pimple, then two. It seems impossible to keep him in the rank he's been assigned. When he loses rank, his ranking of her loses credibility.

She starts to feel bad about herself, critical of him, guilty for being critical, angry about feeling guilty. The competitive battle now begins. This must be somebody's fault. The dimensions of right/wrong, good/bad, success/failure lend themselves perfectly to competitive battles being waged for the long-forgotten goal of feeling really good. This is not to discount the serious content to couples' disagreements (see Chapter 10 on Mediation.) It is just fine to argue about the division of labor in a relationship. But deadly fights about the correct way to take out the trash (dress the baby, cook vegetables) are acting-out competitive feelings.

Identifying competitiveness can be difficult. In the cases of Samuel and Nancy, the comparisons and their results were fairly easy to identify. But often competition is much more subtle. For instance:

1. You're involved in a disagreement and you're sure you're 100% correct. You are without self-criticism. You refuse truly to listen to the other person's position, certain that you understand it and that she is simply wrong.
2. You're feeling bad about a relationship and you're sure it's all your fault. You have no criticism for the other person. You withdraw into hopelessness and resignation.
3. You see a friend that you used to juggle with juggling on the Tonight Show. You suddenly feel sick and go to bed. (This could be the flu, of course.)
4. You're working on a project with two other people and you're positive that what you're doing is superior to what they're doing. You proceed unilaterally, without discussion.
- 5 In a group discussion, you:
 - speak numerous times, before everyone else has had a chance to talk.
 - always speak immediately after Paul, with whom you especially disagree.
 - do not refer to the content of people's remarks, but state new ideas or disagreements in a declarative manner.
 - sit silently, feeling inadequate (the competitive behavior being the withholding of your contribution).
 - take notes, writing rapidly when you agree with something said, but keeping your pen conspicuously still when you do not.
 - interrupt.
 - make faces, laugh, or talk behind your hand to your neighbor, while others are speaking.

6. You are interested in a job (lover, friend, apartment, etc.) that you know also interests your good friend. You silently go about getting it without talking it through together.
7. You know your friend is interested in the same job (lover, etc.) as you are, and so you withdraw from the contest without a word. Some months later you realize that you no longer care for your friend, and you silently fade away from the relationship.
8. You comfort your friend (lover, co-worker, etc.) when she is upset, but never tell her when you feel bad or need something from her.
9. You insist on being comforted without trying to reciprocate.
10. Your friend says, "I feel so down in the dumps. I just don't know what would make me feel better." You comfort him by comparing your own experience: "That must be really hard. I'm never depressed for more than a few minutes. I just have such a strong spirit." Your friend never tells you when he's blue again.
11. You meet a new person and she asks you about yourself in some detail. You tell her. You do not ask her about herself. You feel you've had a wonderful time, and wonder why she never calls you.
12. You have a habit of not giving strokes, even when you think and feel them.

It is a challenge to expand this list. Once our consciousness is attuned to notice competition, it begins to appear with remarkable frequency. Competitive transactions can be as creative as human ingenuity (which is considerable) allows.