

Understanding Oppression

Strategies in Addressing Power and Privilege

By Leticia Nieto
and Margot F. Boyer

Ed. Note: The first of a series of columns addressing personal development, race and oppression. Send questions for Leticia at cuetzpalin@aol.com

Everyone who has tried to address the social realities of oppression and privilege knows that these are tough subjects. Even saying the word “oppression,” or the more-loaded “racism,” “sexism” and “heterosexism,” will get some people’s back up. Many folks start to feel angry, guilty, ashamed or upset when these topics are raised, no matter how we approach them.

But we can’t have a more just society without talking about injustice. How can we address these topics in a constructive way that will help people to listen and grow, not just create conflict and ill feelings?

In this series of columns, we’ll outline an approach that can help people grow in their understanding of oppression, and their compassion for self and others. This approach is largely a psychological one, and we use the language of imagery and feeling more than that of politics or activism. We believe that people can develop more appropriate and useful skills to address the issues of oppression just as they develop other skills, and we’ve found that when people learn about these skills they find it easier to tolerate discomfort, change their own behavior and work with people whose experiences differ from their own.

This is a complex model, and we’ve greatly simplified it for this space. We teach it in the course of a one- or two-day workshop, or over an academic semester as part of a graduate program in counseling psychology. This column will offer a sketch of these ideas, which were developed and synthesized by the co-author of this piece, Dr.

Leticia Nieto, incorporating ideas and models from developmental theory, diversity models and her own work as a therapist, teacher, artist and cross-cultural worker.

We’re all members of many different groups. Many of these memberships reflect our choices and lives in ways that are neutral or positive. Some of us come from big families, and some are only children. Some of us have pets and some don’t. Some of us are basketball fans, symphony lovers, vegetarians or film enthusiasts. We can enjoy these affiliations and know that we are not likely to face discrimination because of them.

Other social memberships are troublesome. Because of our socially ascribed memberships in certain groups – based on gender, ethnicity, social class and other groups – we will experience either oppression or privilege. We don’t sign up to join these groups, nor do we sign up for the system of oppression and privilege, yet they are part of our lives. We use the term “Rank” to describe this system, and we believe that people can develop access to better skills for responding to oppression in each of the rank areas. Later on, we’ll describe those skills in detail, but first we’d like to lay some groundwork for understanding how the system works.

In this model we distinguish among three terms that are sometimes treated as synonyms: Status, Rank and Power. The “Onion” diagram shows these as layers or ways to understand social interactions. Status is the outermost layer, the one that is easiest for other people to see and the one we are most likely to be aware of, rank refers to the system of valuing people differently depending on certain social memberships, and power is the innermost layer, related to the core of our being.

Power relates to our connection to that which is greater than ourselves, to the numinous or the divine. It signals our connection to ancestors and

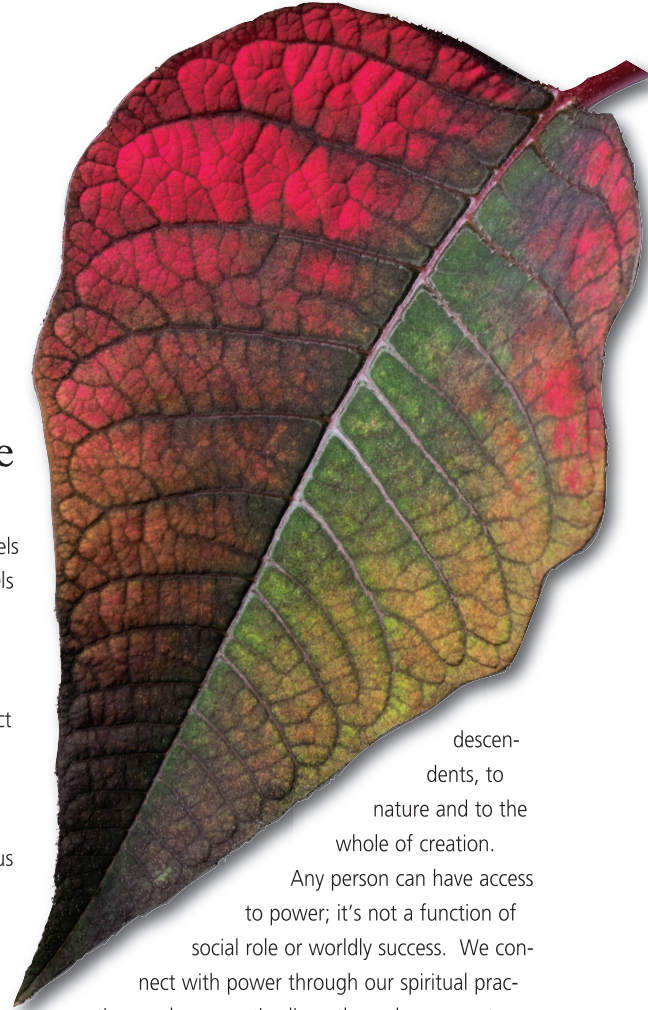
descendants, to nature and to the whole of creation.

Any person can have access to power; it’s not a function of social role or worldly success. We connect with power through our spiritual practices and our creative lives, through our mentors and loved ones, and through anything that allows us to move from a genuine center. In workshops, we ask people to envision a person or being that has this kind of power, and to imagine walking in their footsteps, as a way of getting in touch with personal power.

Remembering our power enables us to work with the challenges of our lives and to cut through the social constructs of status and rank effectively. Usually other people cannot see our power, though they might feel it in some situations.

Status, in contrast, is the most superficial level of interactions, one which is easy to observe. We all know how to take a high-status or low-status position, and we all get lots of practice in both. High-status behavior is marked by a dominant or assertive posture and verbal messages of assertion, leadership, dominance or knowledge. Low-status behavior is marked by a submissive or passive posture, and verbal messages of agreement, compliance, acceptance, and support. Both high- and low-status moves can be useful in some situations or destructive in others – these are fundamental modes of behavior, not good or bad in themselves.

Like other animals, human beings continually play status games. Most of us take both high-



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and low-status positions throughout the day. With close friends, partners and colleagues, status play can become very fluid, with both parties taking each position in turn. Certain social roles evoke particular status behavior, and we'll talk more about those later on.

It's easy to observe status play at any bus stop, family meal or business meeting. Watch an interaction unfold, and you'll likely see people switching status positions regularly. This is important, because status is not a permanent state or role; it's a temporary behavior. Unlike rank memberships, which are generally stable, status play is mobile.

High-status behavior includes many positive activities: leading a group, teaching a class, speaking up for a principle, asserting connection. High-status behavior also includes the whole spectrum of aggression, from positive action to confrontation and even violence. Violence is a high-status move, and this is true no matter who does it. When a person who is a member of a socially marginalized group commits an act of violence against someone who is a member of a socially over-valued group, we see that as a high-status move. It's a temporary situation, a snapshot of an interaction, that doesn't change the underlying dynamics of societal and institutionalized inequity.

Similarly, when someone who is a member of a socially over-valued group or holds social privilege takes a low-status position in a particular interaction, that does not change the rank memberships of the people involved. To use an extreme example, a slave-owner could be kind, friendly or submissive to a particular slave in a given situation, but that would not change who was the owner and who was the slave.

It's helpful to keep discussions of status and rank separated to better understand the issues in both areas. Often when people talk about rank,

Ask Leticia

If you would like more information about these ideas, please contact Dr. Nieto at cuetzpalin@aol.com. If you have specific questions, situations you'd like us to address in future columns or thoughts on these concepts, e-mail us at: naomii@colorsnw.com.

examples of status play come into the conversation. However, the fact that some members of devalued social groups experience success and exhibit high-status behavior does not change the underlying dynamics of rank.

The middle layer of the Onion, rank, is complex. Because rank is difficult to discuss, we use a series of metaphors to attempt to understand how it operates. One metaphor is that of an essentially mechanical system, a conditioned response that everyone is trained to make when they are very young. We call it the Rank Machine. It operates like an old-fashioned clockwork or a primitive industrial system, like an assembly line of 100 years ago, but it happens within and around us.

The rank machine does only one thing: It sorts people into two piles, a small pile of people who are overvalued and a larger pile of people who are devalued. We call these two piles Agents and Targets. Since the rank machine is part of our deep conditioning, we rarely become aware of what it does, or even that it's operating. The effects of rank would need to be measured in nanoseconds. We meet a person, and the rank machine has assessed them as well as us, and categorized them and us, often before either of us speaks. We don't have control over this; it just happens. What we do have some control of is our awareness of the rank machine, and

how we respond to the categorizing that goes on in ourselves and others.

In the United States, the rank machine sorts people in nine different categories. We use the acronym ADRESSING (developed by Pamela Hayes) to remember them: Age, Disability, Religious Culture, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, Social Class, Indigenous Background, National Origin and Gender. In these nine categories, people are classified as either agents or targets. Agents receive advantages or privilege, while targets receive liabilities or oppression.

One problem with this whole rank system, of course, is that the categories are ridiculous and false. People don't fit well into binary, yes-or-no categories. To use one obvious example, racial categories are only social constructs, and many people have ancestors from many places and connections with many

ethnic groups. People are not either "white" or "people of color," we are various and complex. This is the truth.

At the same time, this rank system, as absurd as it is, has a tremendous effect on our lives. Being categorized as male or female, as straight or gay, or any other rank assignment, can make a difference in the access, opportunities and comforts of our lives. This is the reality for life in the U.S. As you read about these models, we'll ask you to keep both of these in mind: the truth that rank categories are absurd and false, and the reality that rank categories affect our lives.

In our next column we'll take a look at how we can build skills, and examine the specific agent and target skill sets. ■

*Have a question for Dr. Nieto?
Send it to naomii@colorsnw.com.*

About Dr. Leticia Nieto

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D. was recently named Outstanding Faculty of the Year at St. Martin's College. Dr. Nieto brings an innovative approach to her training and facilitation work. She draws on



expressive techniques to involve participants deeply and provide opportunities for them to open to insight and change. She has successfully brought her skills to higher education and other learning communities, to service providers in helping agencies, to workplace teams, and to many community groups.

Leticia has been a practicing psychotherapist since 1983, and is involved in training counselors as a core member of the faculty of the Saint Martin's University Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology program in Olympia, Washington. As a teacher, consultant, and student services professional, Leticia has been associated with a number of higher education institutions on the Pacific coast of the U. S. and in Mexico. Leticia earned a B.A. in theatre and psychology, an M.A. in human development, and a Psy.D. in clinical psychology. Her areas of specialty include developmental psychology, expressive and arts therapies, psychodrama, sociodrama, anti-oppression, and cultural awareness in counseling.

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Understanding Oppression

Strategies in Addressing Power and Privilege Second Installment: Skill Sets for Targets

by Leticia Nieto
and Margot F. Boyer

In our last column, we talked about Status, Rank, and Power – three different layers of interactions between people. To make sense of systems of oppression and privilege, such as racism, sexism or homophobia, we find it helpful to separate these elements.

In our model for analyzing social dynamics, Status refers to the superficial level of interaction that humans share with other animals, the one-up, one-down dynamics of day-to-day interactions. Status dynamics are fluid and change from one moment to the next, and most anyone can take a high-status or a low-status position in a given moment.

We use Power to refer to our connection to source or the sacred, our core. Anyone can have access to this kind of Power; it's not a function of social role or position. Power is usually invisible, but sometimes we can see it in action. It's not a temporary condition, but something we can strengthen over the course of our lives.

The Rank layer of interactions is the most complex and troublesome. Rank refers to a socially constructed system in which some people are socially overvalued (sometimes called "privileged"), while others are systematically undervalued and subject to oppression. We call these two groups Agents and Targets, respectively.

Of course, none of us signed up to be part of the Rank system. As small children, we learned a particular set of social rules, which we follow in a mostly unconscious way. We learned what Rank memberships were assigned to us (based on our gender, our ethnicity, our having or not having a disability, etc.), and how we should behave as members of those groups. We also learned to sort and categorize other people based on their social membership assignment, and to expect certain behavior from them because of their Rank makeup. Even as adults, we frequently react to these categories before we have a chance to think about them – we respond to people in nanoseconds, automatically, based on the social rules we internalized as children. When we respond this way, our actions are mechanical and scripted, even robotic. We don't have much consciousness or choice about what we perceive, nor about the subtle aspects of what we do and say.

Overcoming this social conditioning takes a lot of work. We can learn to see through the Rank categories, to act from a deeper, more conscious, real self, our Power, regardless of the social memberships assigned to ourselves and those around us. With practice, we can get better at responding to each situation with integrity, bringing creativity and wisdom to the challenges presented by oppression and privilege, the whole system of Rank.

Like other kinds of learning,

the ability to struggle against oppression, to respond effectively to Rank dynamics, means gaining specific skills. The skills we internalized as young children often won't serve us well in taking on the difficult situations we encounter as adults, but we can learn better, more effective skills. One set of skills applies to us in our Target memberships, and a different set relates to places where we have Agent membership.

The Agent/Target Rank chart shows the way that Agent and Target Ranks are assigned currently in the United States. There are nine categories in which people are ranked. These are socially ascribed memberships – we don't get to choose them. Most of them are permanent and can't be changed by our actions. Take a look at the chart and notice the places you are assigned an Agent rank and the places you are assigned a Target rank. Most people will find they have been given both Agent and Target assignments. That means we all need to develop both kinds of skills.

The model of skill sets here does not describe "stages" of development that we stay in permanently, but a set of skills inside skills like a set of nesting bowls or nested dolls. As we grow and practice our anti-oppression skills, the skills we learned earlier don't disappear, but they are included in a repertoire, which also includes more mature

skills. The larger skill sets give us more choices, more possibilities for action, and a truer sense of ourselves and others. The earlier skills are still with us, though, and we will still use them much of the time. This process of growth that incorporates earlier stages into later ones is sometimes called a "holarchy," and the process of moving to more inclusive skills is called "transcend and include."

A similar process happens as we learn to read. As small children we learn the alphabet. Later, we learn to read short words, then longer words and sentences. As we grow up, we might master reading novels, computer manuals and social theory. Yet the fundamental skills of knowing the alphabet and decoding short words remain part of our repertoires.

It takes more effort to use higher-level skills, and we tend to choose the easier path that uses less-developed skills. Many people find that if we are not required to read difficult books for school or work, we gravitate to newspapers and exciting novels rather than complex technical or theoretical works. When we have the flu, we might find a book too demanding and choose to read magazines or just watch TV. We don't always make use of our ability to read challenging books, and the less energy we have, or the more stress we are dealing with, the less likely we are to utilize our high-level reading skills.

Like reading skills, our ability



to respond to Rank dynamics can develop over a lifetime, yet we will often opt for the less-demanding, more familiar and automatic skills that use less of our energy. We learned the basic skills that fit our Rank roles when we were growing up, as part of our social conditioning. We learned certain skills that fit with our Target social memberships, such as so-called appropriate behavior for a girl, or for a person of color. We learned other skills that fit with our Agent memberships, such as the recognized behavior for a boy, or for a member of the middle class.

We also learned which social groups are overvalued, the Agent groups (adults, able-bodied persons, heterosexuals, non-immigrants, White people and so on). We learned which social groups are under valued, the Target groups (children and elders; people with disabilities; Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians; people of color, gay/lesbian and bisexual people; and so on). The adults in our lives probably passed on these rules without

much explanation, nor awareness that they were teaching us so much about how to be in the world. Since most of us have both Agent and Target role assignments to fulfill, the rules are complex.

In our Target memberships, we learn skills that help us fit in with Agent expectations for our group. Some of us may have many Target memberships, while some of us have only one or two. (The small minority of people who have no Target memberships at all are often referred to as "mainstream," which says a lot about how the system of privilege works.) The description of Target skills will be easiest to follow if you look at the Agent/Target chart and identify just one Target membership that you hold right now. Think about the Target skills from the point of view of just that Target membership that you know very well. (Any readers who hold no Target memberships can think back to the experience of being a child or adolescent to understand the skills.) Bear in mind that the skills described

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here apply only to the members of Target groups within those specific Target memberships.

We call the first skill set for Targets Survival. Survival skills enable us to stay alive and in relative safety by conforming to Agent expectations. There are two ways we express Survival skills. The first is to approximate Agency – to move, think and talk like a person who has Agent membership. In doing this,

we unconsciously attempt to meet the goal of this skill set, which is to make members of the Agent group comfortable and to meet demands based on the Agent group's definition of what is normal or okay.

The second Survival skill is to fit the stereotype that the Agent group has of our Target group: to move, think and talk in conformity with Agent expectations for our group. For girls and women, this means

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meeting the requirements of socially expected “feminine” behavior: to have the right size, the right tone of voice and, especially, the right attitude towards men. In other words, as women using Survival skills, we do whatever is necessary to make men comfortable, including unconscious, though sometimes verbalized, agreement with sexist norms.

Everyone gets practice in Target Survival skills, because everyone has been a child, and all children are age Targets. For a few people, age Targetship is the only type they ever experience. Most of us experience other areas of Targetship, so we’ve experienced using Survival skills in those memberships too. Although we’re usually not aware that we’re using them, Survival skills are exhausting because they require us to constantly change our shapes to conform to the expectations of the Agent group and the Agent-dominated environments we encounter every day. Yet, we get so much practice in these skills that we become very good at them, and when we feel threatened or stressed we are likely to unconsciously fall back on Survival skills.

Part of using Survival skills is to be unconscious of Rank dynamics. Using these skills, we may say that there is “no such thing” as sexism or racism or classism, whatever form of oppression operates against our Target group. We might assert to ourselves and others that we have never experienced discrimination because of our Target memberships, or that we don’t let those experiences affect us or get in our way. As Targets using Survival skills, we will even criticize ourselves or other Targets for failing to meet the expectations for our group. This is sometimes called internalized oppression. For example, as women using survival skills, we may assess and criticize our own appearance and that of other women to make sure we meet the social expecta-

tions for our group. Survival skills for Targets can also include horizontal oppression, which is when as Targets we direct hostility, prejudice, discrimination or even violence at members of our own Target group.

The second skill set for Targets we call Confusion. Describing Confusion as a skill may seem strange, but moving from Survival to Confusion takes work. Confusion skills arise when we notice how exhausting it is to use Survival skills, and begin to realize that something is amiss. We might spend a long time going back and forth between Survival skills and the start of Confusion before we notice that some people are valued differently than we are, that we are encountering oppression. We begin to see the Rank dynamics, and in our hearts we know that the subtle and not-so-subtle inequity we experience is real, and that we should not have to conform to it.

Yet understanding and responding to oppression is a huge task, one we may not yet be ready to take on. We know that we’re encountering inequity, but we do not yet have the language or the support to make sense of it. This mixture of knowing and not-knowing we call Confusion. We may still present ourselves in the ways that Agents expect of us, but we also begin to notice, for example, that the leadership at work is white while the workers are Latino and African American, or that the men in our organization earn more than the women.

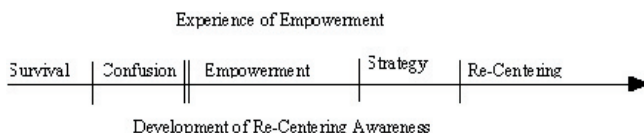
Using our Confusion skills, we may contradict ourselves and doubt the evidence of our senses. We say things like, “That doesn’t seem fair, but there must be a good explanation.” We might even say, “I’m confused,” or “I don’t understand” or “I’m taking this personally.” We admit the possibility that something is wrong, but we do not yet call it sexism, racism or a violation of our

civil rights. We might still act in the ways assigned by our Target role, following those rules we internalized earlier in our lives, but sometimes we think or say or do things that do not fit the role.

As long as our skill repertoire is limited to only Survival and Confusion skills, we remain subject to internalized and horizontal oppression. We may act in ways that are hurtful to ourselves and to people who share our Target memberships, and we will probably not know that, nor why we are doing it. These skills reflect unconsciousness of the whole Rank system and lack of access to our own Power.

Shifting to the next skill set, Empowerment, takes an enormous amount of energy from within and without. It can feel like waking up from a deep sleep or responding to a life-threatening situation. To make this big move we must have access to Empowered Target-only space, a place where people who share a common Target membership get together to talk about what we face, how it feels and what do to about it. This could take the form of a women's group, a black students alliance, a GLBT center, a labor union or any space that belongs to members of our own Target group. Those of us who hold multiple Target memberships may need to join several groups to become Empowered in each of those memberships. (For organizations that want to empower Targets, supporting access to this kind of space is a critical step.)

In Empowered Target-only space, Targets listen and talk about our common experience, what happens to us every day, and often we see others nodding in recognition even before we finish the story. We talk about the historical roots of the problem, the social conditions that support the status quo and so on. Using our Empowerment skills, we need to talk about our experience of oppression, especially the subtle



but constant marginalizations, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else. It's painful, but it keeps us awake, like pressing on a bruise to see where its edge is and how it hurts. When we speak about the oppression we wake up more and more, which can help us avoid sliding back into the unconsciousness of the earlier skills.

Target group members using Empowerment skills will bring up the issue of oppression in many different interactions. We seek out information about our own group and the history of oppression we have faced, and express solidarity with other members of our group. We express anger at Agent norms, Agent institutions and individual Agent members. This constant focus on the issue keeps us activated. The energy of Empowerment helps us mobilize to resist oppression, take action, learn everything there is to learn about the nature of supremacy and how to counter injustice. Yet, constant focus on the dynamics of oppression is often exhausting for the Target and everyone around us. There's a sense that there's no down time. We may bring it up in many environments and at moments that are unproductive, even in situations where we risk our own safety.

As we use Empowerment skills, we may notice that we can't sustain the energetic demand of constantly confronting oppression head-on. We begin to evaluate what works and what doesn't, and to make more conscious choices about when to bring up the issue, when to walk away, when to concentrate on other matters. We call these Strategy skills. Using Strategy, we start to choose our battles and sort out the most effective action: when to work with other Targets, when to make demands of social institu-

tions, when to confront individual Agents, when not to act. We align ourselves with the best values and norms of our own Target group and spend less time reacting to the Agent group and Agent expectations. Strategy skills free us to make choices that support our group and ourselves. We can appreciate other members of our group because of their personal qualities, rather than the Target group membership itself. We find we can selectively appreciate individual Agents who show themselves to be allies in our struggle. Strategy skills conserve our energy and maximize our effectiveness in anti-oppression work.

As we continue to use Strategy skills, we begin more and more to discern our own optimal, liberating norms and values from oppressive, dehumanizing ones, and to support members of our own and other Target groups. We acknowledge the significance and impact of inequity due to Rank memberships and make increasingly congruent and adaptive choices. We find more ready access to our true Power, and are able to bring it to bear on our daily lives. We call these the Re-Centering skills. Using Re-Centering skills, we collaborate with other Targets and with ally Agents to challenge system of oppression in the most effective, humanizing and streamlined ways. We use our understanding of systems of oppression to move into leadership roles in our social-change work.

Few Targets get to use Re-Centering skills, and even the most wise and skillful Targets use these skills only some of the time. As Targets with access to all of these skill sets, we use each one, depending on the situation and how much energy we have in a specific moment. The goal is not to always

use a certain skill set, but rather to use the skills that are most functional in a given moment. Each skill set has some value. We can support ourselves and other Target group members best when we have appreciation for the value and necessity of each skill set. When we receive appropriate support for the skill set we are currently using, it becomes possible to shift into higher skill sets, and to create more effective solutions to the challenges posed by the Rank system.

Anti-oppression work aims to free everyone from the harmful and dehumanizing effects of the Rank system. As we develop better skills, we gain the ability to liberate ourselves and others and to move through the world as whole human beings in spite of the limiting definitions that societal conditioning tends to impose.

In our next column, we'll take a close look at the skills used by members of Agent groups. ■

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Understanding Oppression

Strategies in Addressing Power and Privilege Part 3: Skill Sets for Agents

by Leticia Nieto
and Margot F. Boyer

In previous columns, we've discussed Status, Rank and Power – three separate layers of interactions between people. We envision these as a model of concentric circles, like layers of an onion, with Status on the outer surface, Rank under that and Power in the center. We use the term Power to refer to our connection to our core, our authentic self and the person we are at our best moments. A person's ability to be grounded, to exercise compassion, to use humor in a healing way, to love without demands, and to support themselves and those around them can indicate the presence of Power.

Status play refers to the up-and-down dynamics of interactions, a type of behavior that humans share with other animals. Status play can be as light as teasing among sisters. It can also be hurtful, upsetting and dangerous. Actions that assert our own importance, value or point of view are high-status moves. We can do this in a way that is helpful and positive for those around us, by exercising leadership, speaking out on injustice or teaching a skill. Likewise, low-status behavior can be positive and supportive, as when we actively listen to someone else's story, lend our support to another's idea, or share our appreciation for

someone. High-status behavior can be used in harmful ways too – the ranges of aggressive actions from a verbal put-down to a violent assault are high-status moves. Similarly, low-status behavior is not always benign. Passive-aggressive behavior, refusing to acknowledge someone or ignoring a problem are low-status moves. High-status and low-status behaviors are not, in themselves, good or bad; they're just part of what it is to be a human being.

The key to identifying status play is to ask "when did it start" and "when did it stop." Status-play interactions come and go; we may play high-status in one situation and low-status in another. Our status style preferences reflect our individual personality, and also our professional roles, our family and cultural background, and the styles of our geographical region. Many people in Seattle use a low-status style, sometimes described as "polite but not friendly." It's a cool, correct, introverted way of relating. People who move here from other regions sometimes find it chilly, and many say that it's hard to make friends with Seattleites. New Yorkers, in contrast, often have a high-status style that is both friendlier and more aggressive. This style is hotter, louder, more likely to embrace and more likely to fight. Visitors to New York may find this exciting or frightening – depending on their status prefer-

ences.

Status-level interactions can grab our attention in a given moment, but we can change them by shifting our behavior. One strategy for getting along with people is to notice the style preference of the person we're with, in that moment, and to let them have their preference. When both people insist on taking a high-status position, there's likely to be conflict. When both choose the low-status position, the interaction can be stagnant and the pair may find it impossible to make decisions or move forward. Flexibility in status play can enhance our interactions, free up conflict and allow more vitality and energy in our relationships. Movies, television and theater are full of changeable and dramatic status play, which can be fun to watch and to participate in – especially when we don't take it too seriously.

Our focus here is on issues of Rank, as distinct from Power or Status. When specific discriminatory, exclusionary or prejudiced acts can be seen as discrete in time, we can examine the function of Status play

in that interaction. Rank dynamics, though, are operating full-time.

Rank describes how society systematically and consistently advantages the same people while marginalizing others. Because Rank dynamics are not as distinct in time as Status dynamics, we have found it useful to envision Rank as an essentially mechanical system that sorts people into two groups. The system automatically (and mostly unconsciously) favors some people, who we refer to as Agents. Agents are members of groups that are socially overvalued. Sometimes this is referred to as having "privilege," but because the Rank system is mostly unconscious, Agents rarely notice being privileged. It takes a lot of work to perceive the ways that the Rank system overvalues, favors or advantages us.

The system also categorizes some people as Targets, who are members of groups that are socially undervalued, sometimes referred to as "oppressed." Because the experience of being socially undervalued or oppressed is unpleasant, Targets are more likely to notice the Rank system, even when we don't have words for it.



Another helpful metaphor is to think of Rank like a barcode beneath our skin that is scanned in many subtle ways in all situations. This happens so quickly we don't even notice it. One small part of this scanning process is our scanning of each other: In the instant of meeting, we identify the age, ethnicity, gender and other "rank" roles that each person plays. If we can't figure out how to classify the other person, we might feel uncomfortable or even ask "What are you?" This discomfort reveals how much we rely on knowing how to classify each other in order to figure out how to relate. It can be useful to think of Rank as being made up of all the socialized messages we have internalized about the groups we belong to and those we don't.

We use psychologist and author Pamela Hays' ADDRESSING framework to remember nine rank areas currently important in the United States: Age, Disability, Developmental and Acquired Disabilities, Religious culture, Ethnicity, Social class, Sexual Orientation, Indigenous background, National origin and Gender. Most of us have been assigned Agent rank in some areas, and Target rank in others. We don't get to choose these memberships; they are stuck to us by society, or socially ascribed. Each of these Rank areas, or social memberships, is constructed – that is, invented as ways to categorize people. Our position is that they are fairly faulty rather than accurate, but that they operate as if they were valid, so we must deal with them.

Most of these Rank memberships are permanent. Age changes in the course of our life; we experience Targetship growing up, acquire Agency when we become adults, around age 18, and are again clas-

sified as Targets around the age of 65. Disability rank may change, for example, if we experience temporary or permanent ability loss through an accident or illness. Most of our Rank memberships are pretty stable throughout our lives. This is important to remember because, unlike Rank, Status can change moment to moment, giving us the illusion of a much more flexible or moveable social system.

Because most of us are classified with both some Agent and some Target memberships, effective anti-oppression work requires us to develop better skills on both sides. The skills for Agents and Targets are different; we need both sets of skills, but we use them in different situations. These skill sets are like toolboxes. The early skill sets resemble a small toolbox, with only one or two tools in it. As we grow and practice our anti-oppression skills, the early skills don't disappear, but we get new tools to add to our collection. We still use the earlier skills, but we have more ability to choose appropriate skills that will serve our anti-oppression purposes. These are not "stages" of development – we don't gain some new skills and then use them reliably 24 hours a day. Rather, we are more able to respond effectively to oppression, more of the time, when we have a bigger toolbox. We are more likely to use our high-level skills when we are feeling calm, supported and well. Anything that causes us distress, like being hungry or tired or angry, makes it more difficult to use the high-level skills. For this reason, we see taking good care of ourselves as an important dimension of anti-oppression work.

In this article, our focus is on anti-oppression skills for Agents, members of groups that are socially overvalued. From childhood, part of our

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Leticia Nieto, M.A., Psy. D. was recently named Outstanding Faculty of the Year at St. Martin's College. Dr. Nieto brings an innovative approach to her training and facilitation work. She draws on



Margot Boyer, left, Leticia Nieto

expressive techniques to involve participants deeply and provide opportunities for them to open to insight and change. She has successfully brought her skills to higher education and other learning communities, to service providers in helping agencies, to workplace teams, and to many community groups.

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training in being an Agent is to be unconscious of the whole Rank system and of the ways we are overvalued by society. Even as adults, we don't know that this is happening, and the people around us often prevent us from figuring it out. Usually, they don't know they're doing this because they are also unconscious of the rank system. We learn to not notice differences and the way that they affect our experience and our access to resources.

Before you read the rest of this article, identify one area where the Rank system identifies you to be an Agent. Stay in that "channel" as you read the skill descriptions – think about how you might have experienced these skills as an Agent. *(For the Target skill sets, please check out the October 2006 issue of this magazine.)*

In our Agent memberships, we learn skills that allow us to make ourselves and people who share our Agent rank comfortable. We learn not to notice the existence of the Rank system and the ways in which we are socially overvalued. We learn to not notice members of the Target group, and to not value them as much as we value ourselves and other Agent group members. Most of this training is unconscious

on the part of other people around us; often they are passing on behaviors and attitudes that they are not aware of. We absorb these messages unconsciously, too.

The first skill for Agents is called Indifference. When we use Indifference skills, we are able to not notice the existence of Targets and their life conditions, and the whole system of Rank. It can be as innocent as saying, "I don't know any ____ people." A person who lives in a small community might have a similar attitude, "I've never met any ____." "There aren't any ____ around here." Often, however, a person using Indifference skills will not notice the existence of a person with Target rank, even when they are talking directly to them. Saying, "I've never met a ____" while talking to a member of the group being named is an extreme, but not unusual, example of Indifference skills at work.

The physical posture we associate with this skill set is a simple shrug of the shoulders that says, "I don't know," "It's not my problem" or "I don't know what you're talking about." The key to understanding Indifference skills is to remember that we all must select a portion of

AGENT/TARGET RANK

Rank memberships can be deciphered using the acronym ADDRESSING as a guide to where Agent and Target ranks are ascribed. These social memberships are assigned by society, not chosen by individuals.

Social Rank Category	Agent Rank	Target Rank
Age	Adults (18 – 64)	Children, Adolescents, Elders
Disability	Able-persons	Persons with Disabilities
Religion (relates to religious culture)	Cultural Christians, Agnostics and Atheists	Jews, Muslims, and all other non-Christian religions
Ethnicity	Euro-Americans	People of Color
Social Class	Owning and Middle Class (access to higher education)	Poor and Working Class
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexuals	Gay men, Lesbians & Bisexuals
Indigenous Background	Non-Native	Native
National Origin	US Born	Immigrants and Refugees
Gender	Male	Female ,Transgendered, and Intersexed

the information and stimuli that we are exposed to. Through conditioning as Agents in various social areas, we learn which elements “matter” or are “relevant.” These tend to be Agent-related elements. The result is that Target-related elements are out of our consciousness without us even trying to ignore them. It is not difficult to notice that what bolsters indifference is a socially enforced, passive aversion and devaluing of Targets and Target-related aspects of life.

Indifference skills require the least amount of energy from us. They are the skills we default to in the areas where we have been assigned Agent membership. When we encounter Target group members and can no longer use Indifference skills, we use the next skill set – Distancing, which allows us to hold members of the Target group at arm’s length, to keep them “away” from ourselves. Our feeling is that when we do this, we are actually trying to distance the awareness of our own unearned advantage, rather than those who have been labeled “other.” Using distancing skills, we emphasize the difference between the Target group and ourselves. We notice how much they are not like us.

This skill set is more complex than Indifference; it has three different positions. One is “distancing out.” The physical gesture of this skill is holding our arms in front of us, rigidly, as if holding something away from our bodies. The words sometimes verbalized as, “I don’t have anything against ____; and the sometimes unsaid next thought may be, “I just don’t want to live next door to them.” Or it may take this shape: “They can do what they like as long as they stay in their own neighborhood.” The feeling here, sometimes just beneath the surface and often unconscious, is of disgust, perhaps dislike, or fear. “Just keep it away from me” is the message.

The skill of “distancing down” is the one we are most likely to recognize as bigoted or oppressive. The gesture of distancing down is holding our arms rigidly and down, as if trying to push a lid down on something, trying to close a garbage can, or trying to shove something down into a container. This skill set is verbalized with overtly negative messages toward the Target group: “They’re sick,” “they’re dirty,” “they should be in jail.” Sometimes people using this skill set learn not to verbalize these feelings, but

this doesn’t necessarily change the underlying attitude. Another version of this skill set is the attitude of wanting to “help” or “convert” or “heal” the Target away from their Targetship and towards something resembling Agency.

The third Distancing skill is “distancing up.” Distancing up allows us to see members of the Target group in a pseudo-valuing way, perhaps as special, beautiful, even spiritual or magical. The gesture is of holding our arms up and away from us with our hands open as if to frame a beautiful view. The verbal messages of such distancing up express appreciation for the group’s special qualities – but without awareness of the Rank system, the fact of Agent privilege – or for the individual qualities of target group members. Verbal messages associated with this skill include “____ are so spiritual,” “____ seem really close to nature,” “____ make beautiful music,” or “____ are so amazing, exotic, heroic. Often this skill is accompanied by appropriation of things associated with the Target group, such as collecting art or music by Target group members or imitating a cultural style from that group.

Like holding our arms rigidly raised

for hours, Distancing skills take a lot of energy. They don’t come easily. Organized hate groups, societies organized around oppression and difference, are ways of providing group support for the difficult act of maintaining the distancing posture. But distancing is uncomfortable, especially when we find ourselves interacting with Target group members a lot. At that point we are likely to shift into the next skill set, which feels like a big relief.

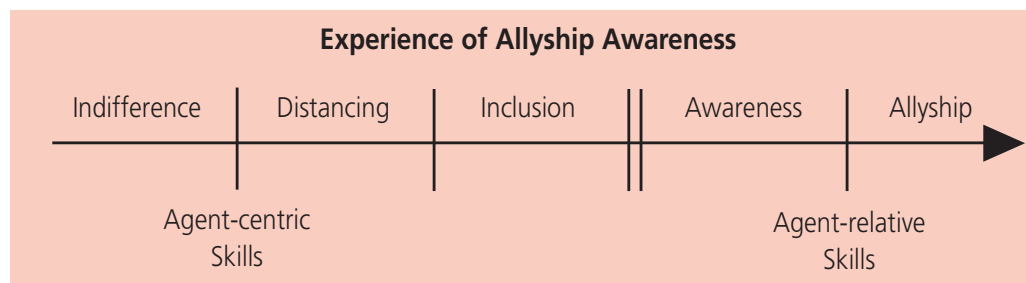
The skill set of Inclusion offers some advantages over distancing. Using Inclusion, we focus on the similarities between Target group members and ourselves. We use verbal messages that emphasize similarity and connection, like “We’re all children of God,” “fundamentally, we’re all the same,” “treat everyone as an individual,” and “every human being suffers.” The physical posture associated with Inclusion is arms open, as if to embrace members of the Target group. As Agents, we experience Inclusion as liberating. It feels like we’ve finally gotten out of the oppression business. We can appreciate members of the Target group. This seems terrific, to us.

It takes a while to notice the limitations of Inclusion skills, and

many of us never do. In society as a whole, Inclusion is often seen as the height of intercultural appreciation, diversity and liberation. Yet Inclusion is still an Agent-centric skill. Using Inclusion, we do not recognize the Rank system, the ways we are consistently overvalued, and the consequences of our privilege and of Target marginalization. Without realizing it, we see our own group, and its values and norms, as the standard, and expect everyone to align with Agent-centrism and Agent-supremacy. We want others to meet our expectations. We may host an intercultural potluck, but we will likely feel annoyed if the people who come bring up the topic of oppression. We feel happy to welcome Targets – but we unconsciously expect them to conform to our expectations, to make us comfortable and to avoid issues that we don't want to talk about, and even to be grateful to be included.

The Agent Skills Model

As Agents develop anti-oppressive consciousness, they build better skills for understanding and responding to oppression. This development is a holarchical sequence of skills sets, as shown below. Each of these skill sets represents some tools for dealing with oppression. As we move toward Allyship, we have more and better tools to work with.



One danger of the Inclusion skills set is that, being very clear that we do not subscribe to or hold negative views about Targets, we can resist the perspective that oppression is essentially a supremacy problem, rather than one of prejudice and discrimination. When we use Inclusion skills we are not conscious of the Rank system, and we can't work effectively against oppression

until we wake up.

Moving beyond Inclusion requires us to move well out of our comfort zone and out of the conventional rules of our culture. It's a difficult transition that we're unlikely to make without a powerful motivation. Usually it takes a strong personal relationship with a Target group member – a close friend, lover, family member or mentor – to care enough about the issue to confront our internalized Agent supremacy and step into the next, most difficult skill set, Awareness.

Awareness is initially experienced as unpleasant. When we access Awareness skills, we feel cold, paralyzed and even disoriented by emotions such as guilt and shame. We see the reality of the Rank system and realize how much it favors us as Agents, and we notice the workings of oppression and privilege all around us. We realize the many ways we have been overvalued in our lives, and we see the ways that the Targets around us are undervalued. We are likely to remember incidents in the past, situations where we used lower skill sets, where we failed to speak up about injustice, where we took advantage of our privilege. The whole Rank system is revealed to us, and we are rightly horrified, particularly because it becomes readily obvious to us that we are going to continue to use Indifference, Distancing and

Inclusion skills for the majority of the time.

The physical posture of Awareness is immobile or frozen. We may feel nauseated or panicked, and we may verbalize horror and shame. "I can't believe I never saw this before." "Everything I say is oppressive, because I'm the oppressor." "I should have done..." Awareness skills are difficult to stay with, because they are so uncomfortable. Usually, when we access Awareness, we will shift back to Inclusion at the first opportunity.

Practicing Awareness skills takes determination and support. Most settings in society discourage us from using Awareness skills, so it's helpful to have friends, allies and colleagues who can confirm the reality of oppression regardless of our perceptions. Awareness skills are, at heart, an opportunity to listen to and learn from the experience of Targets. Using Awareness, we realize that we don't know what it's like to experience oppression in this particular Rank channel (even though we may experience other kinds of Targetship). We can practice what writer and priest Henri Nouwen called "learned ignorance" by thinking and, when appropriate, saying, "I don't know what that's like. Would you tell me more?" We can notice the discomfort we feel when we use Awareness, name it and stay with it as long as we can.

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It's a good opportunity to pay attention to what Targets have to say about their experience.

If we can tolerate the discomforts of Awareness, listen to the experiences of Targets, believe Targets who speak about their experience of oppression (especially when their experiences do not fit with our sense of the world), and delay a shift back into Inclusion, we may be able to access the precious skill set of Allyship. Using Allyship skills we are, for that moment, fully aware of the reality of oppression and of the privilege we receive under the rank system. We acknowledge that we can never fully understand the experience of Targets in that rank area. We see the Rank system operating within us and in others, and we recognize the dehumanizing effect this has on all of us. At the same time, we remain able to think and to act. We are not paralyzed; we can choose to work against oppression, to midwife other Agents

in developing anti-oppression skills and to support Targets. The key to understanding Allyship skills is noticing the shift from dreading experiences of Awareness to a stance of welcoming such experiences. Another way to describe this shift is a growing sense of being comfortable only when being uncomfortable – which signals that Awareness is happening.

Using Allyship skills, we can take on the challenging process of helping other Agents wake up to the reality of the Rank system. We can listen to Agents we might describe as bigots and help them move to the next skill set – increasingly without judgment. We recognize the need for, and can support, Targets in creating Empowered Target-Only space. We can use the social agency of our rank to change the system, to challenge the social hierarchies that favor ourselves. Allyship can mean listening. It can mean speaking out on injustice. It can mean

gently helping other Agents to gain access to a new skill set.

Even if we sometimes can access Allyship, we will not use those skills all the time. When we are busy, distracted or caught up in the dramas of our own lives, we probably aren't doing anti-oppression work. Our commitment to Allyship means a process of waking up, over and over again, to the Rank system and its operation in our lives. As we see that we ourselves don't always use

our best skills, we can practice listening to other Agents and helping them, too, to wake up to the reality of rank and privilege.

In future articles we'll share ideas on ways to help ourselves and others develop more comprehensive skills. ■

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