

# 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

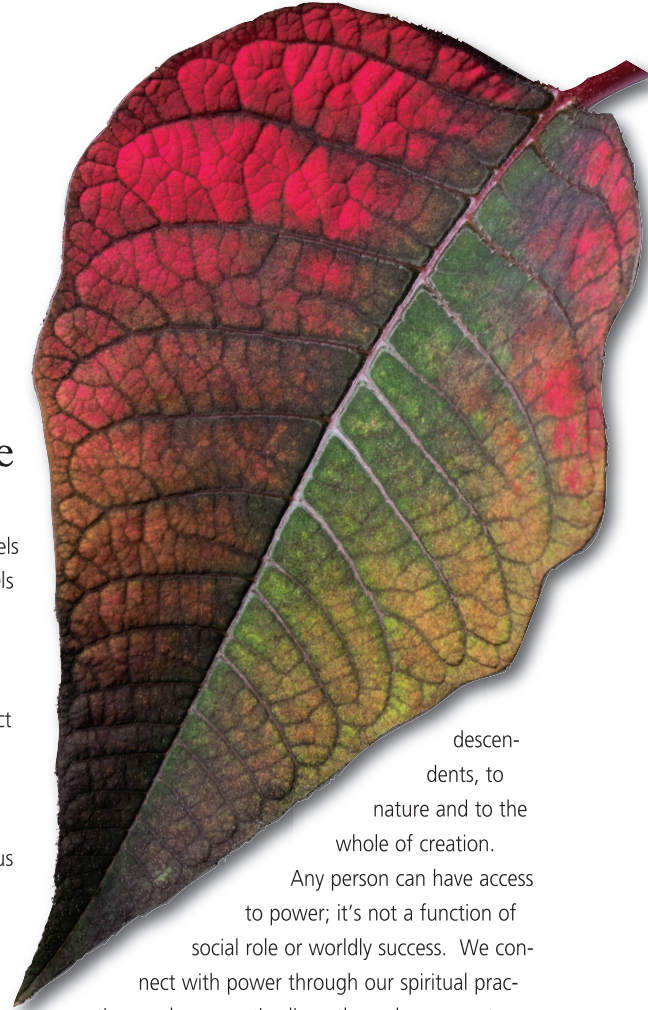
descendants, to nature and to the whole of creation.

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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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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