

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



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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.

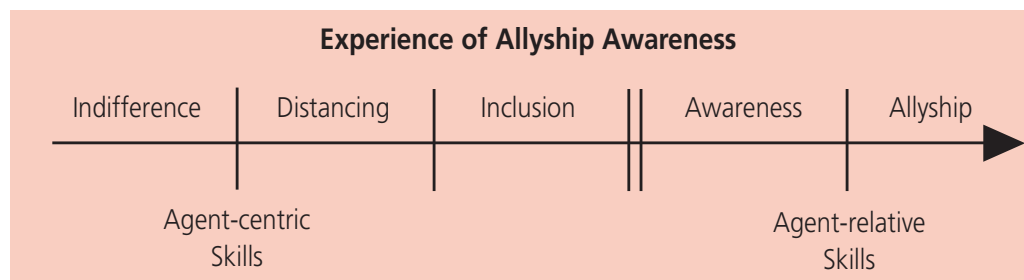
The skill set of Inclusion offers some advantages over distancing. Using Inclusion, we focus on the similarities between Target group members and ourselves. We use verbal messages that emphasize similarity and connection, like “We’re all children of God,” “fundamentally, we’re all the same,” “treat everyone 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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