

# 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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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 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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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.

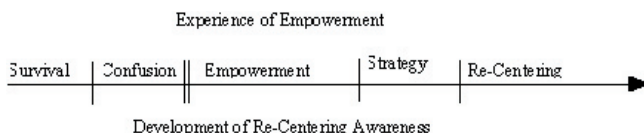
Using our Confusion skills, we may contradict ourselves and doubt the evidence of our senses. We say things like, “That doesn’t seem fair, but there must be a good explanation.” We might even say, “I’m confused,” or “I don’t understand” or “I’m taking this personally.” We admit the possibility that something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