

## What is beyond Inclusion, what is beyond Empowerment, and what do you mean there is a strategy that can liberate everyone?

People interested in social change are untangling a tight knot. Daily experiences confront us with the problems of inequality in new and unsettling ways. Gaps, differences in access, unequal opportunities, show themselves to us at every turn – to the extent that we can bear to notice them. Our natural human capacity for empathy lets us know that there is something very wrong when some have so much while others struggle with the simplest necessities for living.

In discussions of social oppression, diversity, and difference, thoughtful people acknowledge inequality. We see how some are disadvantaged, while others are unfairly advantaged. In this book, we refer to members of social groups undermined by oppression, groups who are socially undervalued and denied equal access, as “Target group members.” Members of social groups with unearned advantage, who are socially overvalued and are granted easier access, we call “Agent group members” or “beneficiaries.”

Target group memberships, that is, social areas where we experience restriction and marginalization, compound with each other in an exponential way, as do areas of Agent group membership. It's easy to see that being a member of the social group called “adolescents” carries restrictions with it. The same is true for the social class category called “poor.” Put them together and the restrictions do not simply add up, they multiply. They represent obstacles in our efforts to craft our life, to fulfill potentials, and to be recognized and respected. It is difficult to convey in language, comprehensively, the lived experience of these restrictions. They are countless, multifaceted, complex. Together, they limit.

Individuals who are members of socially de-valued groups are marginalized and lied to about our value as human beings. The lies are embedded in what we will discuss as “social conditioning,” “institutional structures,” and things as vague, atmospheric, and nuanced as “attitudes.” Social conditioning leads us to think that some of us are less valuable than others because of constructs like ethnic background. Institutional structures limit access based on gender. Demeaning and patronizing attitudes add to the challenges faced by people with disabilities. The lies and negative messages are internalized as well, adding to the stress and expenditure of energies that socially de-valued group members face.

In contrast, members of socially over-valued groups encounter advantages instead of obstacles. One of the advantages is having very limited perception of the extent to which such obstacles exist. As with devaluation, unmarked advantages are also embedded in “social conditioning,” “institutional structures,” and “attitudes.” Social conditioning leads us to live as if some of us

are more valuable than others because of constructs like ethnicity. Institutional structures enhance access based on gender. Affirming and supremacist attitudes add to the rewards reaped by people who have not experienced able-loss. The unmarked advantages and overvaluing messages are internalized as well, adding to the ease and conservation of energies enjoyed by Agent group members.

A White, European American man who is middle-class may arrive in college without ever having noticed the existence of supremacy in society. He will have benefited in countless practical ways from his memberships in Agent groups, and he may have an internalized sense of importance. He will likely carry the belief that his perspective is natural, accurate, and right. When he encounters information from books, classmates, or teachers about oppression – including sexism, racism, or classism – he may dismiss it as wrong, biased, or imaginary.

Most of us, reasonably, trust our experience above all other sources of information. When the topic of oppression comes up, we immediately look in the “file” in our mind where experiences of our being mistreated, disrespected, and excluded are logged. Reliably, we tend to equate oppression with unpleasantness. Since the student in our example has never encountered institutionalized bias and believes that his perspective is complete, he will likely disbelieve the testimony of people who encounter marginalization every day of their lives.

We invite you to notice that a person with Target group memberships encounters negative attitudes and institutional limits that a person with Agent group memberships does not, *and* that a person with Agent group memberships garners unearned benefits. Further, we ask you to peer even deeper to notice that this system of oppression dehumanizes everyone. It is dehumanizing to be diminished by comments and jokes, to have our needs ignored, to be disrespected, and to be treated as an object. It is also dehumanizing to be manipulated by our conditioning, to have our perception be rigidly restricted when it comes to realities outside our lived experience, to be prevented from being moved by human suffering, and to be made immune to someone else’s voice. Whatever social memberships we hold, oppressive social conditioning limits our ability to be fully human. It limits our emotional range, reduces the depth of our empathy, and often keeps us from speaking, listening, loving, and living fully.

Both in areas of Target group membership and areas of Agent group membership, we need access to authentic responses instead of programmed, conditioned ones. Recognition of the realities of social advantage, social restriction, and the role of conditioning in our outer life as well as our private inner world makes way for the possibility of freedom.

## Getting Started

As we live, we accumulate many skills for dealing with social oppression – skills for living and working with people whose life experience differs from our own. In this book we see parallel but distinct pathways to consciousness and action for Agent and Target areas.

All societies lean on social conventions. You might envision this as a backdrop on the stage in a theatre. Scenes from a play, the play of our lives, take place “against” this backdrop. The backdrop is covered with particular social values, including tendencies to overvalue some and devalue some. Socialization is the process of absorbing, internalizing, and adapting to the social norms of any society while remaining oblivious to them. We follow the action of a play more than we stare at the backdrop. Participation in any society requires a degree of unconscious conformity to dominant values.

Jacob Levi Moreno (1993), creator of psychodrama, described health as existing on a continuum between two points – the robot on one end; the spontaneous, creative human on the other. Moreno’s role theory offers many useful concepts such as role flexibility and role repertoire. Moreno states that when it comes to roles, the more restricted and robotic the role, the less healthy it is for a human being. The more flexible and organic roles better fulfill our capacities. Both poles of oppression – social marginalization as well as social privilege – dehumanize by narrowing our roles. The limits imposed on our behavior push us in the direction of being robotized. This stereotyped pattern of behavior, or “cultural conserve,” makes spontaneous action difficult and at times impossible. We believe that everyone – regardless of particular Agent and Target group memberships – can access freedom from role rigidity and move toward spontaneity.

Most people are drawn to the idea of fairness. We want everyone to have a chance. Ideas like “diversity” and “multiculturalism” signal a collective desire for inclusiveness and harmony. These are difficult goals, worthy of our efforts. Yet, usually inclusiveness means folding members of groups that are Targets of oppression into dominant institutions and practices, requiring assimilation to existing norms. For example, we readily respond to the idea of people from many different religious groups working together in a school or workplace. Yet, we often fail to anticipate and meet the challenge of someone from a Jewish, Muslim, or Buddhist heritage pointing out that Christmas decorations are not representative. In such instances, members of dominant or Agent groups can feel offended, angry, or defensive. We might experience requests for fuller inclusiveness as attacks. The discussion may quickly devolve from an impulse to fold “everyone” in to defensive reactions by Agent group members. Because we are unaccustomed to anything other than dominance, we may adopt an empty, cold solution that excludes everyone. Typically, these outcomes leave everyone feeling hopeless. After so much good intention and so much effort,

### The Cultural Conserve

The cultural conserve is a concept that comes from psychodrama and the work of Jacob Moreno. If something has been active in the culture long enough, it becomes “conserved” in it. It’s not new anymore. The cultural conserve is made up of those ideas that have become so embedded in the culture that they have dropped out of awareness. Being within the culture, you and I are registering certain experiences, or acting out certain behaviors without the ability to consider them. The cultural conserve therefore pulls us away from fresh, improvisational, adaptive, spontaneous thoughts and actions. (Increasing capacity for spontaneity is a major concern of psychodrama.) In anti-oppression work, we find ourselves fighting culturally conserved behavior because within the cultural conserve people are not choosing, and are not aware

Moreno explains, “These conserves determine our forms of creative expression. They may operate at one time as a disciplining force — at another time, as a hindrance. It is possible to reconstruct the situation of creativity at a time prior to the conserves which dominate our culture” (1993, p. 12).

the general sense can be that ground was lost rather than gained in terms of the feeling of unity.

Inclusion and good intentions don't get us far enough. Such efforts only take us part of the way to effectively addressing supremacy that is built into the systems of society. To only include is to put out a conscious message of welcome, while simultaneously broadcasting an unconscious demand for members of Target groups to assimilate: to leave their "otherness" at the door, to blend into rather than challenge the status quo. Inclusion-oriented approaches reinforce for members of Agent social groups that social justice is about allowing "everyone" access to "our" (Agent) settings, rather than transforming Agent systems, values, and norms, which would truly shift the center.

Take a moment to consider events or initiatives that were limited by this superficial approach – cultural heritage events centered on food, or recruitment efforts that stalemate at tokenism. Notice how these efforts can result only in surface shifts. They may even have the effect of delaying deeper social change. After all, we have already...held a cultural festival...advertised in all the publications of Color...built one ramp in our main building. Sadly, Inclusion-oriented efforts may lose us precious ground. We are left neatly delineated within our Agent and Target roles. Getting beyond Inclusion to liberation requires moments of realization. It requires that we hold in our consciousness realities like unearned advantage. These are times when we awaken. We can suddenly see that oppression always goes in one direction, limiting and harming members of socially Targeted groups and consistently advantaging members of Agent groups. (Most of us carry both Agent and Target group memberships, as we will discuss.) Awareness brings brand new skills. We learn more flexible and effective ways to recognize and respond to the effects of the Rank system on ourselves and others. We can help each other wake up.

We can't do anything about things we don't know. Social structures – the expectations we learned in our families, the pop songs on the radio, the television news, the way schools and work places are organized – reflect the unconscious acceptance of the Rank system in myriad ways. Like fish in familiar water we tend not to notice the pervasive, totally ordinary manifestations of oppression when they appear in our world or in our own minds.

We use the word "trance" as a reminder that there is such a thing as states of consciousness. A trance can be any state of partial consciousness, whether positive (like an artist so focused on her painting that she doesn't hear the phone ring), or harmful (like a driver preoccupied with personal problems who runs a red light). In conventional trances – those states of mind we consider normal – we fail to notice oppression or privilege at work. But Awareness, a trance in which we see conventional beliefs from a larger perspective, opens up possibilities to be more human and more humane.

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## Who and What Is This Book For?

Anyone who makes the commitment can develop more effective skills for recognizing and responding to oppression. This work is not only for specialists or scholars. But it does require a significant amount of work to practice. This book provides tools that can support the development of these skills for people who want to do anti-oppression, social change, and social justice work. You will find theory, images, stories, metaphors, and exercises that are part of a *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment* training, and that reflect the experience of those who study and teach it.

This approach to liberation doesn't require a comprehensive knowledge of the cultural expectations, body language, or communication strategies of every Target group and sub-group in the United States, though such information can be highly useful. The *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment* models and methods focus on skills. The material here can help you build on the skills you already have, whatever groups you belong to, work with, or care about.

Thinking about and trying to change oppression and privilege is exhausting, challenging, and dispiriting. While there may be moments of breakthrough and exhilaration, people working on social change often experience disequilibrium and discomfort. We believe that we can be most skillful in solving problems only when we receive adequate support from ourselves, our friends and families, and our environment. Under stress, we regress – we have access to fewer resources and become less able to handle challenging situations. Sacrificing your basic needs is likely to reduce your effectiveness in the long run. Anti-oppression activists must attend to their own individual needs, and to their collective needs for support, community, and energy, if they want to keep going. If you take on the enormous challenges of confronting oppression, take care of yourself.

We work from a developmental or evolutionary premise. People grow. Change is inevitable. We influence each other's growth and development and can be intentional about influencing in the direction of liberation. Anti-oppression skills are possible. We can demonstrate by example and role model skills for each other, fostering our effectiveness as bringers of change. Anti-oppression skills can only be developed one at a time. As we will talk about later, they stack. Also, knowing about a set of skills is not the same thing as being able to access them when we want them. The more aware we become, the more likely we are to notice those inevitable times when we are less aware.

The *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment* approach is highly permissive. The goal is not to access the most sophisticated skill level twenty-four hours per day and seven days a week, but to increase our range of skills so that we have more options, and so that access to a full repertoire of skills is more and more possible. We will use more limited (less effective) skills often – behaving

### Training in this Material:

We work with people interested in this approach by offering training experiences to practice anti-oppression skills. Most people find that having some exposure to this material (as might be gained from reading this book) provides them with tools to deepen the work they do in anti-oppression, organizing, teaching, and facilitation. But the reading of this book is not enough to become a competent trainer in this content. For those interested in pursuing further training, please contact: [academy@cuetzpalin.com](mailto:academy@cuetzpalin.com)

in ways we would prefer not to. Increasing access to more comprehensive skills requires intention, practice, and time. Building these skills takes place over years and decades; they can't be gained by reading a single book or taking a single class. We urge patience with ourselves and each other.

Acknowledging the challenges of development, and the fact that nobody is able to use their most complex skills all the time, we can have room for people whose attitudes and behavior seem graceless, self-defeating, ignorant, or just plain wrong. We might even have compassion for ourselves when we are graceless and wrong.

The models of development we use are based in psychology, and we will come back to them throughout this book. We start with the phenomenology of experience within social systems. We see anti-oppression as one part of an integrated process of human development that cannot be divorced from other kinds of growth. Effective anti-oppression education requires that we cognitively understand the Rank system and how it affects us. It requires that we cultivate self-awareness, the ability to notice what we are feeling and thinking. We need solid communication skills, deep listening, wider capacities for expression, and techniques for closing the loop between our meanings and other peoples' meanings. Our commitment to liberation is inseparable from our commitment to grow as human beings in every area of our lives.

The models and methods here are for everyone who wants liberation, including people who have access to privilege, those marginalized by oppression, and the many who get a mixture of both. *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment* is directed especially to those who have put in some time to understand the constraints of oppression and how they affect all of us, especially teachers, healers, counselors, activists, and leaders. It is meant to enhance your effectiveness. It can help you find your own sources of support, to break out of unconscious conditioning, find your center, and move from it.

PART ONE :

# Reading Social Interactions