

Why we use the word "Target"

On the last session of a 15-week graduate class in this material, students were invited to speak about their most important learning. A student very solemnly rose and said,

"I must speak. I've had difficult experiences around racism as a Person of Color. I have felt a great deal of pain in my life because of the impact of racism, but until I came into this class I never saw a bull's-eye painted on my body. The word 'Target' has been really difficult for me to carry, it has felt like a curse, like a sentence."

I thanked this student for her words and told a story about how difficult 'Target' is for me as well, and how all of us in the field struggle with how to put these ideas into language. We know that just giving them words can constitute an incident or a re-triggering event.

I mentioned that when I've done this work with people in Mexico – attempting a translation of some of these ideas from English into Spanish – I'd remembered that the word Target translates as "blanco," which also means 'white.' Everyone in the class laughed when I told them this. I explained that in Mexico I'd settled on the words "marginado" for marginalized group and "grupo privilegiado" for the advantaged group, noting that these words were awkward too and not necessarily better.

I asked my student how those two words, marginalized or Target, sounded to her. She said that marginalized was about being pushed aside, not given access...and Target was about a heat-seeking missile that is going to find her. I asked which word felt more accurate. With tears in her eyes, she said they both felt accurate, but that the word Target felt more accurate to her experience. Afterward, she asked me to please keep that word in the work and in the book.

Leticia Nieto

The Agent and Target Roles

Rather than the terms "oppressor" or "dominant group" for people who have memberships that are overvalued, and "oppressed" or "subordinate group" for people who have membership in groups that are socially devalued, we use the terms Agent and Target (Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 1997). This is one way to move beyond simplified ways of thinking about Rank dynamics. We encourage you to avoid thinking of the oppressor as a profile that is easily observed from the outside. The image of the "oppressor" calls up behavioral features such as aggression, exclusion, and discriminatory words and actions. These are better understood through the lens of Status play.

Rank is considerably more complex. Given the nine elements of social membership, most people's social profile includes both Agent and Target memberships. The word Agent is meant to evoke not the image of a hostile oppressor, but rather a person who is experiencing unconsciousness about social inequality due to supremacist socialization. Again, Agent Rank is expressed largely through unconscious attitudes. Agent Rank isn't conscious; it's not something that people usually "do" on purpose. It is associated with automatic or automated behavior, something that happens before anyone has a chance to think about it, quick as a thought, or a blink of the eyes.

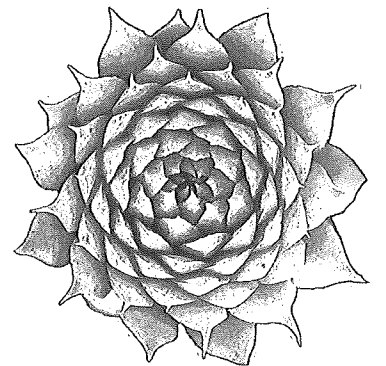
Similarly, the word Target is meant to evoke not the image of a cowering victim, but rather a person who is experiencing partial unconsciousness about social inequality due to marginalizing socialization. Again, Target Rank is experienced largely unconsciously. Target Rank is not about low self-esteem; it is not something people bring onto themselves. It's more of an automatic or automated program. It takes hold before anyone has a chance to resist it, quick as a thought, or a blink of the eyes.

Differential socialization

In order to concretize the idea of early socialization, we invite you to imagine you are with a group of people moving around in a room. Imagine that the words you are taking in affect your posture and movement. Pretend that no one can engage with or resist any of the messages they are receiving, and instead must take them in wholesale.

The voice of Agent socialization announces: "You are good. You belong. You are a part of the solution. Expect things to work out. If things do not work, you are entitled to express your frustration. Take up space. Use your voice. Make your desires known. You're doing it right. You are normal. You belong. You deserve." Let these words affect your posture, your direction as you move, and your pace.

Now imagine that everyone in the room is asked to freeze in place. Most



people will have taken on a vertical posture, with a high center of gravity, an open chest, a level or slightly raised head, and a general forward leaning.

Now the voice of Target socialization announces: "You are less. You don't belong. You are the problem. Don't make waves. Don't take up space. Don't be noticed. If things work out, don't draw attention to it. But don't expect them to. You're doing it wrong. You don't belong. You don't deserve. You are abnormal and you are other." Let these words affect your posture, your direction as you move, and your pace.

Again imagine that everyone in the room is asked to freeze in place. Most people will be postured in a "closed in" or concave way, with a low center of gravity, a downward gaze and lowered head, and their bodies appear to be moving forward and back at the same time.

Try on the possibility that in every area where you carry membership in a socially over-valued group, there is a tape playing at all times reinforcing and strengthening the messages of Agent socialization. In every area you carry Target membership, a tape plays repeating and deepening the messages of Target socialization.

Imagine that there are nine small TV screens on the front of your body. Each one is playing the socialization and programming that goes with either your Target or Agent membership in each of the ADDRESSING areas. Not only are all of these screens always playing; they are receiving up-to-the-minute, updated material as well as broadcasting it in order to condition people around you. This is one way to think about the term pervasive when talking about oppression. We are programmed by an early age. We continue to receive reinforcement throughout our lives. We participate in our own programming and the programming of others, and all the while, we remain unaware of the supremacist and marginalizing themes.

These roles are conditioned early in our lives; the basic structures are in place by the time we're three or four years old, before we go to school. The conditioning continues throughout our lives, coming from all around us. We are conditioned to behave and to experience things in certain ways in our Target roles and to behave and experience things in certain ways in our Agent roles. Part of this conditioning prevents us from noticing the incongruity between the conditioning we receive where we have Target membership and what we receive where we have Agent membership.

Here's another image to try on: nine train tracks that never intersect. In each of the nine areas of the ADDRESSING model, we experience differential socialization and conditioning. In one area, we may be receiving the message that we are worthwhile and our participation is needed while in another area we receive the message that we are a drain and are safer if not heard from. The incongruity goes unnoticed. We miss the contradictions. We remain unconscious of the conditioning, and of our Target and Agent roles, until we begin to wake up.

Fighting Words

One of the reasons it's important to understand and differentiate between Status and Rank is that many are confused about why some people can use charged words while others are told they should not. When explaining high Status play and the bonding and healing function of high Status among Target group members, we sometimes talk about "fighting words." People who share a group membership may accept language from one another that would be deeply insulting, even fighting words, when coming from someone outside the group. Playing with such language can be a way of cementing group bonds, while simultaneously defusing words that hold considerable power to hurt. Hot-button words such as racial insults or the word "queer" are used among people who apply the word freely to themselves and to one another – yet the same word, coming from someone who does not share membership in the group, would be profoundly insulting and disruptive to communication. Appreciating the activity of Status play can help us understand the apparent paradoxes governing who can say certain words.

Oppression

We define oppression as outmoded supremacy. Supremacy is the overvaluing of some groups (and overvaluing everything associated with those groups), and the resulting undervaluing of everyone else (and undervaluing everything associated with those groups). Embedded within social systems are mechanisms that keep these evaluations in place. Oppression is crosscutting, systematic, constant, and pervasive. It's both external and internal. It can be horizontal (directed against members of our own Target groups), and internalized (directed against ourselves).

We are conditioned from birth to participate in an oppression system in which we overvalue some groups – including ourselves where we belong to those groups – and to undervalue some groups – including ourselves where we belong to those groups. We are also conditioned not to notice the existence of oppression, of overvaluing and undervaluing, or of the roles we have been conditioned to play.

Privilege

In areas where we are members of Agent or overvalued groups, we carry unearned advantages and benefits. We also carry unconscious supremacy and entitlement. A word that is often used to refer to all of that is privilege. Privilege springs from Agent supremacy structured into the fabric of society and into our conditioning and socialization. Social systems default to values associated with the Agent group. In this way, Agent group membership is normative. Notice how that reinforces supremacy. Not only are Agent group members and Agent-related features overvalued, but they come to stand for what is normal. Notice how often the word person, for example, in a news story, implies a member of an Agent group, while the Target group has to be named to express a deviation from the Agent standard.

Let's look at gender. Societies assign characteristics, adjectives, and descriptions to the masculine. It is possible to notice the ways male-associated qualities are treated as more valuable. People who display the characteristics that have been associated with maleness, such as physical strength or rational and non-emotional thinking, are highly regarded. People who display other strengths which have tended to be associated with femaleness, such as strong emotional bonds or taking care of other people, are ignored, pathologized, disparaged, and included in only nominal, limited, and conditional ways.

Whatever our gender, our socialization trains us to attend to people with male-associated characteristics. It becomes difficult, if not quite impossible, for us to question whether, or when, those characteristics are over-valued. This is how privilege becomes invisible, unconscious. The functions of

The Economic function of oppression

Rank influences allocation of resources, so that a few people have a great deal of access while many have significantly less. As individuals go through their daily life – without noticing – members of Agent groups will experience advantages that few receive, but they will perceive them as being available to all. Everyone else, all members of Target groups, will not experience those advantages on a regular basis and will be conditioned not to expect them.

Agent group membership does not have a felt sense.

privilege are "normal." We've been socialized to accept, and even promote, the overvaluing of certain characteristics. We've certainly been socialized to avoid questioning why we value them over other characteristics. As women, we might hear ourselves thinking "I'm too emotional," while biological men are unlikely to criticize themselves for being "too logical."

Outmoded supremacy is dehumanizing. Clearly, individuals who are members of Target groups are dehumanized by being devalued and by being only rarely represented accurately in media and other contexts. Through the mechanisms of collective scapegoating and projection, Target characteristics and members of the Target group become identified with negative content that the Agent, or overvalued group, needs to project onto someone else. Not only that, supremacy is also dehumanizing to individuals who are ascribed membership in Agent groups. The film *Tough Guise* (Jhally, 1999) carries out a useful analysis of modern masculinities. In it, the male anti-sexism activist Jackson Katz highlights the destructive effects of what he terms hyper masculinity – a trend in everything from films, music, and toys, to extreme forms of power-over, immature masculinity. Others, such as Moore and Gillette (1991), have written about boy masculinity versus mature masculinity to get at the same ideas. The point is, overvaluing grants social advantages and unearned benefits, but it also steals the humanity of those it advantages.

Take a moment to try on the above paragraph as you consider Agent group members of each of the nine ADDRESSING categories; adults, people who do not have a disability, members of the dominant religious culture (Christianity/Christendom), European Americans, middle- and owning-class people, heterosexuals, non-Native people, people born in the U.S., and biological males.

Privilege doesn't feel like anything to those carrying Agent Rank. Privilege does not have a felt sense. Members of Agent groups may not feel that we are above others; we just feel "normal." This also operates for members of Target groups. Socialization trains members of Target groups to internalize the sense that it's "normal" to highly value certain characteristics without noticing that they are associated with the Agent group (at least until we gain access to the skills of Empowerment and beyond). What we have here are the roots of Agent group members' unconscious supremacy and of Target group members' internalized oppression.

The norms of society default to you if you are a member of an Agent group. The economy of energy sustained by socialization defines supporting the Agent group as "normal." Studies like the Implicit Association Test (IAT Corp., 2010) show us that when we make automatic associations, our responses reflect our social conditioning to over-value Agent groups and their characteristics. When we deliberately slow down our responses, our results show less bias in favor of Agent groups. Noticing our instantaneous, socially programmed responses to Agent and Target groups allows us to make different choices, to be more human and less robotic in our actions.

Owning One's Agent Group Membership

At this point in the process of unpacking Rank, you may feel overloaded by trying to figure out "Where do I fit into all this?" You may wonder about group membership. Examples may come to mind that suggest to you that the Target/Agent ranking process is softer than what we've presented here. You may wonder whether all this is valid.

Agent and Target group memberships are experienced often in indirect and unconscious ways. Students and workshop participants sometimes comment that they don't experience Agent or Target Rank in explicit ways. Of course, since these dynamics are largely unconscious, few of us experience them directly or clearly. What most of us pay attention to, most of the time, are Status dynamics. We notice how we're doing in social interactions. We notice if we are treated with respect. We notice whether our car is older or newer than the car our neighbor drives. We notice whether our colleagues approve of us. Rank remains invisible and unconscious, unless we actively seek to uncover it.

We all generally have an easier time seeing ourselves in our own Target group memberships than in our Agent ones. Incidents around our Target group memberships are often unpleasant and call our attention to Rank dynamics more than do incidents around our Agent group memberships. It can also be more emotionally comfortable to identify as a person facing oppression than one who benefits from privilege. Many of us who hold Target group memberships can come to accept the idea that we are a Target of oppression in certain areas, but feel resistance to the idea of being a member of an Agent group or having unearned advantage.

Both Agent and Target positions are roles with scripts and habits. This is not to say that all members of an Agent group are the same or that all members of a Target group are the same. But all of us carrying Agent Rank are socially conditioned in similar ways, as are all of us where we carry Target Rank. The Rank system functions so smoothly and unconsciously precisely because we have all learned our roles so well. For example, women know what the expectations are for our gender: we started learning our roles as infants, and we've had lots of practice since then in being "a good girl" and "a nice woman." We've been expected to dress, speak, and behave in certain ways, and we may have gone along with or resisted those expectations. If we've resisted, we may have encountered criticism and hostility from others. Whether we conform to the role or deliberately choose to act in other ways, our early conditioning continues to influence us in myriad ways.

When we are in-role as Agent group members, our experience is that we're just going around minding our own business, doing the best we can. Where we carry Agent Rank we don't feel like there's anything special going on to make our life easier. We're not aware of the unearned benefits that follow us

Pain is Good

We are an anti-pain society: Got an ailment? Here, take this pill. We take pills for every kind of pain – growing, sleep deprivation, anxiety, so-on-so-forth. At some point, we become so numb to real emotion that when we have it, it is scary and we want it to go away. The work we do to educate ourselves around “isms” will undoubtedly test our emotional pain scale when we ‘use our eyes’ for the first time (as Neo did in The Matrix). We have to choose whether to experience the pain or use only the skills safely within the boundary of our socialization.

Shanna Kinzel

everywhere we go; benefits like speaking in “standard English,” access to health insurance, inherited property, or the assumption on the part of others that we are law-abiding citizens. We are aware of doing our work, taking care of our families, just living. We’re not kicking anyone out of the way or stepping on anyone. We often feel that we are quite helpless to change the circumstances of our lives or our society – we see ourselves as struggling under a set of limitations that everyone faces.

In our Agent group memberships, we have certain assumptions. We expect to be treated politely when we go shopping and to receive courteous assistance when we deal with a government agency. We default to a consciousness where people “like us” will be presented in a positive or neutral light in the newspaper, on television, and in public discussion. If our expectations are not met, we will probably feel offended and surprised, and may take action to complain or assert our rights. For example, if we have an experience of being excluded, we are likely to notice it because it is out of the ordinary.

It’s very difficult to see ourselves as beneficiaries of unearned benefits and privileges simply based on our membership in an Agent Group. It’s a challenge to recognize the pervasive influence of that membership in our daily lives. Everything in our environment and all our social conditioning has discouraged us from noticing this advantage. When we do notice it, we’re likely to first apply unconscious effort to un-notice it. Failing that, we are likely to defend and deny the reality of advantage. If that doesn’t work, then we may feel shame, guilt, or anxiety. We may react to these unpleasant emotions by retreating into unconsciousness, by closing our minds and hearts to the privilege we carry.

We’ve mentioned before that Rank is constructed. The Rank categories are not completely valid abstractions, and they can be applied arbitrarily. There is therefore a high degree of ambiguity and vagueness to the constructs of Rank. At the same time, dynamics of oppression are very real. We recommend carrying out an anti-oppressive exercise: If you feel confused or ambivalent about how you “fit” into a Rank category, consider the possibility that you may be a member of that Agent group. Try on that possibility. Make a case to yourself for your own membership in the Agent or dominant group, remembering that these Rank categories are not about one’s own identity but rather ascribed. If after that critical work you continue to feel restless, there are three possibilities.

First, you may be feeling a conditioned response of denying your own advantage. Second, you may be bumping up against mechanisms protecting you from realizing your membership as a Target. Third, you may be on to a secret that could reveal a Target membership.

A situation of denying your own advantage could look like a person who identifies as atheist, who is struggling with the idea of being a religious culture Agent, since they clearly do not identify themselves with Christianity as a religion. The process of denying or separating oneself from the advantaged group is part of the social conditioning for people in the Agent group. In fact,

the atheist in question is likely a member of the dominant religious group under Christendom: the normative, dominant, *cultural* group. It’s easy to see how many people who define themselves as atheist would find themselves in this quandary. As we mentioned earlier, in the category of religious culture, if the socio-historical norms that have shaped a person are derived from the expansion of Christendom, the person is a religious culture Agent unless he or she is a member of a religious group outside of Christendom. Or, another way of saying it: if the God you don’t believe in is the Christian God, then Christendom has still been a primary reference or framework in your life. This has to do with what normative ideas each person was exposed to, not what religious ideas people subscribe to.

Sometimes conditioning protects people from realizing their own membership as a Target. For example, a mixed race person who is White-identified and perhaps has been told or believes they “look” or “pass” for White may believe their experience has been little affected by racism. They may see themselves as distinct from People of Color who have “really” suffered under racism. Elsewhere in the book we will further explore this Target process.

The third possibility is getting close to a family secret. For example, a European American person may be struggling with their classification as a member of the ethnic Agent group and not really know why. Sometimes the reason is that the person’s ancestry is not fully known to them and the existence of a grandparent of Color, for example, has been hidden from them. These kinds of secrets are not uncommon, and they are a function of oppression. In workshops and classes, we often say, “If as far as you know, you are a member of the Agent group...” because this gives participants a chance to feel the ambiguities of working with Rank.

Most of us think more about our own Target group memberships, and devote more energy to liberating ourselves and other people who share those Target memberships, than we do to owning our own membership in advantaged groups. Focusing on areas where we have Agent group membership allows us to become more conscious in the areas where we are usually least so.

Doing anti-oppression work from Agent Rank membership also allows us to make positive use of the social advantage we receive as members of Agent groups. For example, White people can do a lot to address racism and to help each other wake up to the reality of White privilege. As members of Christendom, we can raise consciousness about Christian supremacy in our schools, work places, and public institutions. We may pay a price in Status loss for our activism, but the cost to us will be less than for members of socially devalued groups who speak up about injustice. As Agent group members, we can take responsibility for our privilege, work to make the rights we enjoy available to everyone, and engage in reclaiming our own humanity. Working from our Agent group membership offers significant benefits to ourselves and to others.

Everywhere I go, everyone wants to know what I have to say. I don’t really have much to say; I just repeat what the members of Target groups have told me. I get so much more positive attention all the time. I walk into the store and people want to help me – I get the full meal deal every time. I can screw up, do a lousy job, not be qualified, and still get hired!

For my partner the situation is the opposite. Linda has this real-world knowledge for working with oppression, she’s super skilled, and smart, and she just gets hammered by her supervisors and ignored by a lot of people. She’s a diamond.

I just try to do what I can, and I get a lot of credit for it. The more privilege you have, the less you have to do to get a lot of positive reinforcement.

Ed Weisensee

Exercise: Agent and Target Experiences

Think of an area where you carry Agent group membership. Write or share with a partner three experiences that you feel have informed that membership for you. Notice whether you had any difficulty sticking to that one membership without bringing in elements from other memberships.

Choose an area where you have Target group membership. Write or share with a partner three experiences that inform that membership for you. Notice whether you had any difficulty sticking to that one membership without bringing in other elements from other membership.

Thinking of your Target group membership, what are some of the messages that you remember receiving? Thinking about your Agent group membership, what are some of the messages that you remember receiving?

Most of us have social profiles that include both Agent and Target memberships. We recommend an anti-oppressive exercise that we call "Lead with Agent group membership." The suggestion is, in ordinary situations, to consciously locate a social area where we carry Agent group membership. Tune into its attendant unearned advantages (whether we can identify the advantages specifically or not) and speak / think / act from that place. For example, a woman who holds Agent group memberships in the other eight areas walks into a meeting at her workplace and engages from her middle-class or adult or temporarily able voice rather than her female voice. This may be difficult to conceptualize, but we encourage you to try it.

Acknowledging and "owning" our membership in socially over-valued groups, where we have it, tends to wake us up from our unconsciousness about the Rank system. It can help us become more aware of many aspects of our lives that we usually don't pay attention to. Waking up is an essential step to liberation – one way we can free up our own energies and potential for growth.

Exercise: Breathe in, Breathe out

Think of an area where you have Agent social membership and an area where you have Target social membership. Close your eyes if that is helpful. As you tune in your Target membership, breathe in as long and as deeply as you can. Notice how this brings you inward, creates a certain tension and resistance, and restricts the space you take up. Now, as you tune in an area where you have an Agent social membership, breathe out as long and wide and expansively as possible. Notice how your body relaxes, you are able to find relief, and the space you take up is bigger. Repeat as necessary, until you are able to embody the tension of Target experience, the ease of Agent experience, and the differences in space.

Liberation: A Skills Perspective

What if we thought of liberation not as right versus wrong behavior, good versus bad people, or liberal versus conservative approaches, and instead thought of it as a question of competence, capability, access to skills? The ideas here are rooted in developmental psychology. This discipline examines the process by which human beings change and mature, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, moral, and spiritual growth. Within each of these arenas, human beings gradually increase our range of skills and capabilities, or skill sets. We all have the potential to acquire new skill sets throughout our lives. Each new skill set is built on the previous set of skills. Previously acquired skills do not disappear, but are incorporated into the structure of the new skills, in a process that philosopher of consciousness Ken Wilber describes as "transcend and include" (1996, p. 67).

Some important skill sets that emerge together are identified as "developmental stages." For example, a predictable set of skills emerge when a child is about one year old, with emergent capabilities for walking, talking, and social relationships, along with new fears and anxieties. Late adolescence is another identifiable stage of life, when new cognitive skills emerge along with moral and ethical abilities.

For our purposes in this book, we invite you to move away from the idea of a stage as a place. Rather than prescribing a geographical sequence of *where* human beings may be, we are working with a different metaphor: the metaphor of range, as in vocal range. A singer trains in order to expand the range of notes they are able to sing. Maturation or development can be seen the same way. While it is useful shorthand to conceive of a human geography of stages, we see that image as being overly static. A forty-year-old is supposed to be at a particular stage. Yet, we all know that a forty-year-old has not lost the ability to act in a way that a four-year-old might. The hope is that a forty-year-old has more *options* than a four-year-old has.

Everyone we have ever been lives in us. This is not just a poetic way of thinking about it. Rather, it is a way to remember that we have not really lost any previous way of being or seeing. The hope of human development is that the wider our range, the more likely that we will use skills best suited to the demands of our lives. Instead of a hierarchical perspective that says that higher is automatically better, we align with the holarchical notion that the wider includes (and transcends) the narrower. Sometimes the response that a four-year-old might have is exactly the right and best one – even in a forty-year-old. Range gives us more choice. It is therefore liberatory.

Having said all that, don't be surprised if you catch us falling into the habit of speaking of stages. We'll attempt to remind you of the range versus stage metaphor as often as possible.

The notion of developmental sequence can also be used to understand the developmental processes of cultures, societies, and groups. The Spiral Dynamics model developed by Clare Graves (Beck and Cowan, 1996) is one example. Clare Graves described a meme as a value wave determined by the life conditions of a collective. With the idea of developmental range in mind, consider the definition of oppression as outmoded supremacy. Imagine that you are part of an early human collective. You may well be picturing a nomadic group. Let's say conditions have been hard and our imagined group has suffered illness and scarcity. From a spiral dynamics perspective, the meme in question would be *beige* or survival. Stated more succinctly, the conditions of our lives cause us to value certain things over others. In this early group we value survival; food, shelter, safety. Until those needs have some guarantee of being met, other values may remain subordinate.

Our group is hungry. There is little food to go around. One of the children spots a herd of boar on a nearby hillside. Just one boar would be a feast, enough to keep us all going for some time. We have enough food for five people to eat, and we need them to succeed in the hunt. All women of childbearing age are either pregnant or nursing infants. The elders are vulnerable. And so, we privilege five young men with food so that they can hunt and save the collective.

This is an example of what we could call functional supremacy. Every era of human experience is characterized by the establishment of supremacies – the overvaluing of some things over others – that served a function at the time. The trouble with supremacies is that they are easier to install than they are to dismantle. You could say that oppression is the problem of outmoded supremacy. Never doubt that even now we are putting in place supremacies that may make sense for our moment, such as the overvaluing of scientific intelligence, that may become the dysfunctional baggage of the future.

Our focus in this book is more individual than collective. We've been especially curious about the change process an individual goes through. To this end, we rely heavily on what is known as Object Relations Theory, whose ideas were articulated by individuals such as Margaret Mahler and Otto Kernberg (Frankland, 2010). What follows is a simplified description of the Object Relations template.

At the beginning of our journey we all started as fertilized eggs. Our first task was to attach securely to the uterine wall. Failure to attach would have resulted in the egg vacating the uterus. Against significant odds, our microscopic cells succeeded in attaching. Once secure, our sole objective was to absorb nutrients and use those nutrients for growth and cell creation. During that time our absorption was indiscriminate. Whatever our host consumed determined what was available for us. We had no choices but to absorb. Eventually, we reached the limit of what that culture of embeddedness or uterus could offer us. We became restless and prompted a process we call birth.

Birth is the means whereby we overthrow the womb that held us. Birth is a necessary emergence into a completely unknown way of being. The cycle is not complete until we are able to relate to that which we were once inside of. This is difficult to visualize in regard to a uterus. So, let's quickly go to the next rung in the individual human's unfolding.

Once born, we start the dance again. Just like a fertilized egg, the newborn has one crucial task: to attach and then to absorb. Predictably, after the 21st month out of the womb, humans evidence a restlessness that leads to a second birth marked by a good amount of squirming and hollering the word 'NO!' This 'NO!' can be translated to mean "I am no longer in you" or "I am no longer you." "Maybe I don't know who I am, but I know one thing, I am not you."

This dance continues for the rest of our lives. Kegan (1982) gives us a spiral model of development. We attach to increasingly complex wombs until we fill them up completely and can get nothing more from them, and then we bust out of them in a series of births. I become a series of increasingly more truthful versions of myself relating to an increasingly wider object. The first few rounds (intrauterine, first-birth, "terrible twos") happen rather rapidly (nine months, two years). These early cycles are fast compared to later cycles, which could take ten years or more. But the pattern remains.

Notice that attachment is followed by indiscriminate absorption of whatever the culture of embeddedness offers. We attach to the womb, to whoever cares for us as infants, to the family, to society. Each time we separate, we emerge more skilled. Notice that each of these cultures of embeddedness fits inside of the next one: the womb is in the mom, the one who mothers is in the family, the family is in the society. The three-part dance, then, is: first attach, then separate, and finally integrate (be free to build a relationship with that which once held us).

The work of anti-oppressive consciousness development has to do with emergence from the societal womb: to go from being in society in an undifferentiated way, through a kind of birth, to the ability to relate to our social context through critical analysis.

Again, the process of transformation through development happens most rapidly in babies and children, who transform themselves in countless obvious ways as they develop from an infant to a toddler, or from a toddler to a child. An equally profound process of development can continue through all the decades of a long life, but the changes adults undergo are rarely so apparent to a casual observer. As we go through the object relations, attachment-separation-integration dance described above, we gain progressively complex skills. Each skill set that a person acquires through their development becomes part of their basic equipment, increasing the range of tools each of us brings to new situations. The skills we have already mastered become reliable capabilities that we can fall back on when necessary. In any given stage of our lives we take for granted the skills we are most identified with,

Mothering is a
function —
not a person.

*The wider
The FEWER
The Harder
The EASIER-
looking.*

and these are often invisible to us. The skill sets that we have not yet developed ourselves can seem incomprehensible – we may not be aware that such skills are possible or even desirable.

In a good moment, we may be able to access our most sophisticated and mature skills: to think clearly, to be patient, to plan effectively, to be supportive of others. This relates to what we call Power and to the latter skill sets we will be describing soon. When we are tired, hungry, afraid, or otherwise under stress, we may fall back on older skills, those learned when we were younger or had fewer resources. The earlier skills remain available to us, even when our self-definition has shifted to reflect the skills we acquire later on. In other words, we may think of ourselves as dignified and mature, yet sometimes act in undignified and immature ways.

Just as in the object-relations sequence we described earlier, these successive skill sets, each containing previous ones, are an image of what Wilber (1996) calls a “holarchy,” using a term coined by Arthur Koestler. We can visualize them as a set of nesting bowls.

The skills of the eight-year-old are whole, complete, and unified. She may be excited about learning math, envious of her older brother, and enjoy playing on swings and climbing trees. The eight-year-old’s experience of the world is limited by the skills available to her – her point of view is shaped by the things she can know and understand at her developmental moment, in terms of both her cognitive understanding and her psychosocial development.

At fifty, the same person will have access to many more skills. The skills learned at the age of eight will still operate, coming forth when they are needed for the situation at hand; she still knows how to add and subtract. Yet the point of view of the fifty-year-old, her understanding and attitude, is substantially different from the one she held at age eight. The skills acquired earlier in life still operate, but they have been integrated into the larger framework that life experience provides. The fifty-year-old can remember some things about being eight years old, but she cannot fully enter the reality she experienced in the past. She is defined by what she has lived and equally by the current holding environment/womb that she is navigating.

We guess that the view from within the uterus varies significantly from the view outside of it. Each shift is that drastic. When people come to consciousness about oppression, they often report a feeling of being startled, shocked, or amazed at how different the world looks to them.

Because the emergences are sequential, no steps can be skipped. You can’t go from pushing your own stroller to getting your own apartment – even if you want to. And anti-oppressive consciousness requires a developmental readiness. Each skill set must be mastered and exhausted before the next one can be accessed; it is not possible to skip any skill set, nor any stage of development. We must fully explore the tools, the capacities, and the limitations of each framework before we feel the authentic need for something more. When we shift our point of view to identify primarily with the new

stage, we can still access skills from the earlier set, but our sense of self is no longer bound up with them.

As parents, educators, or facilitators, we may feel impatient with the skills we observe in others, and want to “help” them develop faster. But the process of development cannot be hurried – no amount of information will enable someone to get through a skill set or stage of development any sooner. Tugging on plants has never been a reasonable gardening practice. Instead, we tend. We work to create conditions that promote optimum development. Not faster, but optimum – best. We can support others in fulfilling the needs of the skill set they currently have access to, but we can’t force them on to the next stage of development.



Skill Sets and Holarchy

Ken Wilber (1996) uses the model of holons in his work, suggesting that the entire Kosmos (the physical and social universe and the interior realities of ideas, emotions, and experiences) is made up of holons, or whole/parts, which combine to form holarchies. Each item in a holarchy is both whole in itself and a part of something larger and more inclusive.

A way to visualize this is the letters on this page. Each letter on this page is complete in itself, a whole. The letters make up words, each one of which is whole. The words combine to form sentences, which are wholes – yet still made up of words and letters. The paragraph is a more inclusive whole made up of whole sentences. The paragraphs make a chapter, the chapters make the book, and the book on the shelf is also a part of the library. At each level, from single letter to the entire collection of the library, we can see the individual component as a whole, complete unit. Yet we know that each unit is also a part of something much greater.

The same kind of relationship applies to skill sets like reading. When we are little, if we learn to read, we likely begin by learning an alphabet. Later we incorporate the letters into our early reading skills, by sounding out short words. Our basic reading skills become part of our more sophisticated word recognition skills. Our ability to read simple materials allows us to read more complex material, until we are able to read novels, computer manuals, and social theory. Wilber describes this process as “transcending and including,” meaning that each skill set is incorporated into the next set, while still retaining its integrity as a distinct holon (1996). Our ability to name the letters of the alphabet is still with us, even as we read to comprehend challenging new ideas.

The medicine for each skill set is in the next skill set.

Julia Maxwell

