

Expanding Skill sets

Helping Ourselves And Others To Increase Our Skills Range

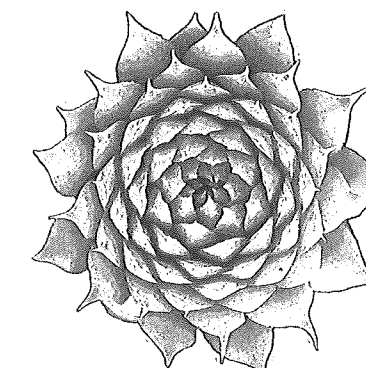
Developing our own skills for liberation is the essential ground for countering oppression and for supporting others compassionately. Identifying the skills we use in a particular moment helps us wake up and notice what we are doing. It gives us clues for recognizing the manifestations of specific skills in others.

In areas where we carry Target group membership, we need to caucus with other members of the same Target group – especially fellow Target group members whose skill range exceeds our own. We need to be with people who know what it's like, who can affirm our experience. We need to be together to develop strategies. We need to be in settings where we can relax, be ourselves, and support each other, in a setting that is free of Agent group members and Agent group agendas. It's quite difficult to find, create, and maintain Empowered, Target-only environments. Yet, we need plenty of time in the relative safety of Target-only space.

Empowered spaces are spaces dedicated to liberation. They are spaces where we acknowledge the reality of oppression that we face, where we can practice our Empowerment, Strategy, and Re-Centering skills. These might be dedicated social change groups, but they can also arise in the context of a student group, a mosque or synagogue or church, a labor union, a family, a group of friends, or a workplace. They are also spaces to relax and have fun – settings where we can experience a taste of Re-Centering.

As Target group members we have frequent, if not constant, exposure to Agent group members and Agent group messages. An important part of Target skills development is the ability to discern when, how, and with which Agent group members to engage regarding issues of injustice. This is a difficult proposition. Members of Target groups with access to Empowerment skills, but little access to Strategy or Re-Centering, are likely to feel compelled to address injustice in most situations. Yet a flexible range of skills, and tailored, deliberate responses by Target group members to oppression, are critical for sustainable social change.

An important discipline for Target group members is to take time to make a clear decision whether to engage in dialogue with Agent group members, not only because outcomes are better when we are Strategic, but because, as Targets, we must develop the musculature of conscious engagement versus reactivity. When we react, we are often made more vulnerable and less effective. When we choose, we have opportunities to design responses that will be protective of us and other Target group members and still serve



All around us rain that fell
 evaporates
 steaming open the seal of fear.
 Smell the earth
 wet with promise and scattered
 "yesssss".

Leticia Nieto

liberatory ends.

It is not as easy as it might seem to decipher who Agent Allies are. A friend who is an Agent group member may reveal the ability to be our Ally in one moment and in another exhibit access only to Distancing or Inclusion skills. One confusing element for many Target group members is our ability to judge that an Agent person is a good person, and yet reconcile that with their inability in a particular moment to access anti-oppressive skills. Living in a liberatory way as a Target group member means, more than anything, learning to slow down, to take the time to observe and assess. While this may sound very mechanical and analytical, like any other practice, it can become an organic process, second nature. When we observe these practices in others, we often call them centeredness or wisdom. But while they may look elegant and effortless, they don't usually start out that way.

To increase our skills range in our Agent group memberships, we need exposure to Empowered, Strategic, and Re-Centered Target voices. In the book *Blink* (2005), after demonstrating the reality of unconscious bias, Malcolm Gladwell addresses the question of what to do about it. A part of the answer is that with regular exposure to positive associations, implicit negative associations can be softened. So, given that many media images are laced with implicit negative messages about Target group members, Gladwell suggests that we go out of our way to engage positive images of Target group members. Direct contact with Target group members allows us to find common ground, fostering our Inclusion skills. Welcoming information that either challenges us or challenges implicit negative assumptions about Target group members can support us in developing skills from Inclusion into Awareness and Allyship.

We can learn from the experience of Target group members that we meet at work, at school, or in our community. To fully get the reality of Target group experiences takes a certain degree of relationship with a person who has had those experiences. It can be difficult to break through the formality of polite interaction to make a more personal and real connection with people who are different from ourselves. Groups focused on anti-oppression work can be a great setting to do this: a gathering where people with different social memberships, who share a common goal of challenging the Rank system, can get to know each other. Structured exercises, more informal exchange, and working together on projects – these are opportunities for us to listen to each other.

As members of socially over-valued groups, we need to take ourselves out of our own comfort zones and practice active, courageous listening. Our role conditioning has left us believing that we know more about oppression than we actually do. We think we know what members of socially undervalued groups experience, but we don't. We often rush to equate some experience we've had with an experience a socially undervalued group member has had, using our Inclusion skills. When Agent group members access a memory from a part of our experience where we hold Target group membership in order to

Sustainable Social Change

One way to build sustainability into our liberation work is to consciously shift our focus between the areas where we carry Agent group membership and the areas where we carry Target group membership. The work we do as members of over-valued groups involves a different set of "muscles" than the work we do as members of marginalized groups. We can avoid burning out and growing hopeless by switching our focus when we need relief from one type of effort.

feel connection or resonance with someone in a separate Rank category, this is an example of Inclusion skills. We also call this "switching channels." Much harder for us is to slow down, get quiet, and listen to the voices of people who are systemically under-valued. This is one of the most valuable, and difficult, practices: deep listening (refer to the section "Incident Analysis and Response Tools" later in this book).

As both socially over-valued and socially under-valued group members, we need to work with others to help them wake up, to challenge the conditioning of oppression, and to help break the oppressive trance. This takes courage. We may find that those who are over-valued systemically often don't want to hear about the Rank system. It's common for Agent group members to object "I'm not privileged," "I'm not bigoted," or "this isn't my problem." The process of helping Agent group members to wake up takes patience. It may take a long time. We need to respect, and care about, the people we are working with – even when they exhibit attitudes that are hard to take. Members of socially de-valued groups, too, often don't want to hear about the Rank system. It is common for us to object: "I've never been discriminated against," "I've never experienced oppression," or "You're exaggerating." The process of inviting consciousness to Target group members means we are bearers of bad news. We need to respect Targets' readiness to face harsh realities.

In our Agent group memberships, we have been exposed to the idea of "helping the underprivileged," and we might think that our role is to "help" Target group members. This reflects our Agent conditioning – it's an example of Distancing down, and it's not Allyship. We can do most for liberation by working with our fellow Agent group members, listening through the sometimes-ugly manifestations of their/our role conditioning, and supporting their/our development. This is true Allyship. It's not easy. Building long-term relationships to support fellow members of socially advantaged groups in developing their skills is labor-intensive, delicate work.

In situations where we work with others, especially when we take a helping role as a mentor, advisor, therapist, or the like, we must consider the skills available to the person we are working with, and meet them where they are. It's counter-productive to try to force an understanding that a person is not yet ready for. If we have, either as Agent group members or Target group members, access to a wider set of skills than our client or student, we might perceive solutions that are simply invisible to the person we are working with.

Bear in mind that people can develop only from one skill set to the next – skill sets cannot be skipped. We try to help people where they are, and perhaps give them the support that will enable them to gain access to the next skills, the ones that lie closest to their present reach. The same is true for ourselves; we can only move skill by skill. If we notice that we are using Distancing skills, for example, we can focus on accessing Inclusion skills as the next step in our own growth in that area. It's not possible to jump from Distancing to Allyship; we can only grow incrementally, one step at a time.

FAQ

What about "political correctness"?

Originally, the spirit of political correctness had to do with the desire to be respectful, right historical wrongs, and be sensitive. However, in many ways the term "political correctness" has come to mean environments that are restrictive and which result in Agent members going "underground" with discriminatory and supremacist attitudes, words, beliefs and actions. In these circumstances, what is achieved is simply a burying or covering over rather than changing of such attitudes and beliefs.

Real change is much more likely to occur when organizations, individuals, and communities begin to recognize supremacist ideas, words, or practices as part of the context in which we all live and work, rather than as personal expressions of individuals that should be disciplined and curtailed. When these supremacist attitudes are seen as part of the context we all share, there is less focus on identifying and punishing individuals for using earlier skill sets. In such permissive environments, the expression of supremacist content can be midwived from less conscious to more conscious and therefore result in liberatory social change.

Visualize a
locks & dams
system —
each level must
fill completely,
in sequence.

Certain conditions can help foster the growth of new skills, but they don't guarantee it. Permissive environments, where people can use all skills fully, are essential for development. Skills have to be explored and used before we can discover their limits and become ready to shift into the next skill set. It can be difficult to tolerate certain skills in institutions, but space for people to use these skills is required before they will be ready to move on. This might look like naming a skill set for what it is, appreciating the value of seeing the skill in action, or noticing that it is wider than the previous skill set. The early skill sets are symptoms of socialization; it's not helpful to demonize people for using them. No skill sets can be skipped — if we want people to expand their skills range, we have to find ways to help them make use of the skills they have. When incidents happen, and they will, we can use them as teachable moments.

Becoming aware of the skills model can help people orient. Each skill set must be completely fulfilled — fully understood, mastered, and maxed out — before the next skill set will become available for expression. Specific behaviors come and go; the point is to notice skills as they emerge. Deep listening is a constant feature of growth-producing environments; validating a person's experience, acknowledging their feelings, and supporting their expression creates a space where people feel welcomed and supported. This is essential for all kinds of growth. When we feel unmet, we retreat. We use foundational skill sets, we avoid challenging situations, and we operate in automatic ways. We defend ourselves, cling to our old habits, and are not available for learning.

Valuing each person, listening to each voice, is at the heart of liberation work.

Making The Shift: Multiple Models Of Growth

As we've seen, the critical movement beyond the conventional level of development can be identified on a variety of developmental frameworks. Moving beyond the conventional level through a "red pill" experience can stimulate post-conventional consciousness across many lines of development. The "red pill" experience is sometimes called "radicalization." The Brazilian anti-oppression educator Paulo Freire (2000) used the term "conscientization," the development of conscience and the ability to do critical social analysis — what he called reading the world.

Using the metaphor from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999), taking the red pill represents an awakening from the unconsciousness or trance state of being lost in a representation of real life while being essentially plugged into a system. This system uses our life energy outside our will. In the film, at one point Neo is likened to a battery. The awakening is marked by pain, loss, and challenge. Yet, those who awaken experience a deeper level of vitality — engagement with the real world. Those who awaken retain the ability to enter the Matrix, yet they know its limitations and can also operate in the real world. They have transcended the Matrix, yet can still include it in their consciousness.

In Kohlberg's model of moral development (1981), the shift from "conventional" to "post conventional" marks the transition from passive acceptance of the socially accepted moral rules to a larger sense of right and wrong that is founded on transcendent principles such as justice, equality, or universal compassion. A person who is ready to expand their moral reasoning range beyond conventional ground will remain aware of the rules and laws of their society, and can follow them when they judge it appropriate to do so, but they can also act for a larger conception of morality than their culture allows.

This radicalization is difficult and, like any new skill, takes practice. Also like any new skill, without practice, it will extinguish. The "red pill" experience may be a direct result of witnessing the negative or violent aspects of one's own social context: seeing the destruction caused by affluent life styles, attempting positive reform and encountering obdurate resistance, or going to jail. Noticing the operations of the Rank machine can wake us up to other harmful aspects of our own society.

A person who has made the shift to post-conventional morality can distinguish among necessary rules and those which enforce social custom or the harmful elements of one's own society. Such a person might obey the traffic laws while driving to a demonstration, and deliberately violate trespassing rules to make a political statement about nuclear weapons. They might go to jail for their beliefs, yet treat individual law enforcement officers with respect. This is an example of "transcending but including" the earlier stages of moral development.

Every rising calls, and has called for,
Awareness that ripens into Action.

Oppression is a constant. It is continuously felt, consciously, and unconsciously.

Julia Maxwell

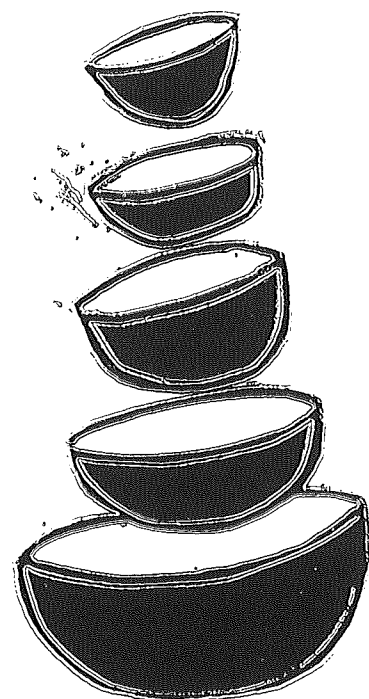
Using the object relations concept, we experience transformation of our relation to a context many times in the course of our lives. We repeat the shift from being contained within a specific holding environment, to being outside of and in relationship to the previous holding environment. As infants, we move from the holding environment of our primary caretaker to the larger family system, to neighborhood and school systems, to groupings in the larger social world. As adults, we shift from identification with specific groups, dogmas, and belief systems, into more spacious "containers." At each shift, we experience some degree of shock and disorientation as we shift from one container into the next. We retain the ability to identify with earlier containers, such as our family of origin, throughout our lives.

Using Erikson's model of psychosocial development (1994), we can agree that the development of strong ego structures and practiced access to the skills of Identity (ideology, self-concept, self-reflection, etc.) are a necessary foundation for Intimacy skills (self-transcendence, decontextualization, immediacy, embodiment, etc.). From a psychosocial perspective, the red pill experience is associated with the realization that we are socially contexted and that our consciousness has been largely shaped by socialization. Egoic strength and verbal-intellectual fluency, along with affective strength (such as a high tolerance for strong emotion and ambiguity), make it possible for us to shift the center in social analysis and connect authentically and anti-oppressively across significant differences. We might even consider these faculties a sign of maturity.

As we've seen, in both the Target and Agent skills model, the radicalization experience allows access to the post-conventional and anti-oppressive skill sets. When we gain access to these skills, we also develop a more critical consciousness about the "conventional" rules of our home context. Our ability to access the wider skill sets can be strengthened through specific practices, but the narrower skill sets continue to be available to us.

Using the Spiral Dynamics model, we would say the "red pill" experience marks a shift from the locally prevalent meme or value system to the next meme in the spiral. For example, in Europe in 1600, we might say the prevalent meme was the *blue* value system of obedience to authority, religious piety, and conformity to cultural absolutes. The shift of some individuals to an *orange* meme that valued empirical knowledge and the insights of the individual over received authority precipitated a wider cultural shift called the Enlightenment. While many elements of the Enlightenment's preference for the rational have proved problematic over time, the shift to *orange* values also paved the way for the notion of individual moral authority, political rights, and a move to more democratic government.

Orange values have been a strong element in the United States, and the negative consequences of *orange's* rational, science-worshipping, strongly individual value system are plain. One consequence of the focus on *orange*



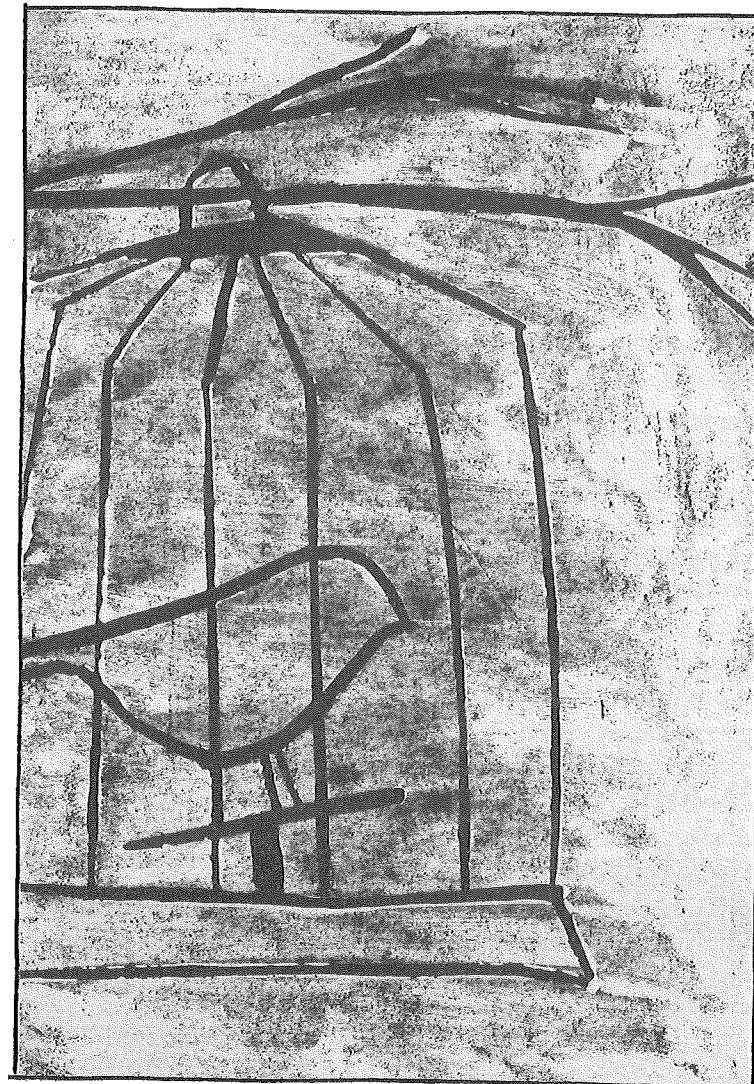
values has been the profound degradation of the earth's ecosystems, which within the *orange* meme have not been seen as valuable. Today, many people have gravitated toward a *green* value system, which stresses interdependence between human beings and all of nature, the wholeness of Gaia, the wisdom of ancient cultures, and the value of cultural and biological diversity.

Green functions as a necessary corrective to the excesses of *orange*, yet *green*, too, has its limitations. Those of us embedded in *green* values can be resistant to all hierarchies, even those which serve growth. Our distaste for ranking systems and love for cultural diversity can make it hard to distinguish between better and worse social practices. Wanting to appreciate differences, we sometimes forget to honor growth and development. Our passion for equality can lead us to self-righteousness and ruthless political correctness. Those who have made a further shift to *yellow* and *turquoise* are challenging these limitations.

The spiral dynamics model emphasizes the unfolding of values as cultures and the individuals within them develop over time. Each meme or values system honors important aspects of the human experience, and represents an essential stage of unfolding consciousness, yet over time new value systems grow in importance. Any person who shifts from a dominant local value system to the next one – whatever specific value systems are in play – experiences an awakening to a larger reality, a move beyond what is conventional.

In each of these models of unfolding consciousness, when individuals move beyond their familiar context to a new and unexplored one, they experience a degree of displacement, shock, and discomfort. At the same time, a person breaking through into new consciousness will have opportunities for discovery, growth, and liberation. This shift isn't the end of personal growth; it vastly expands the possibilities of our lives.

*A MEME is a value wave
determined by the life
conditions of a collective.*



Bird in a Cage

Marilyn Frye (1983) gives us an insight into the experience of groups that suffer under the system of oppression with the image of a birdcage. She describes the experience of members of Target groups as one of confinement, caught within a system of barriers like a bird inside a cage.

She goes on to shine a light on the ways members of Agent groups, as outside observers, can completely misapprehend the situation. With a focus too tight, Agent group members may see a bird, and may see a strand of wire, but not see the other wires. Holding this perspective, members of advantaged groups can study the wire exhaustively and never understand why the bird is constrained. Viewing the wire in isolation, it is not clear why the bird cannot simply fly past that strand any time it wants.

With a step back, though, Agent Ranked people can shift perspective to view the whole cage, then instantly comprehend why the bird never flies anywhere.

It is clear, she explains, that "the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon."

Spiral Dynamics

Spiral Dynamics is a framework for understanding the development of human values. How do values differ from person to person, from culture to culture, and how do they change or develop over time? Psychologist Clare Graves, who provided the initial research, conducted an extensive series of psychological tests in the 1950s and generated a large body of data from which he built a theory of levels of existence. Graves saw human societies as open systems that dynamically adapt to changing conditions. His research identified different levels of what he called bio-psycho-social systems that have emerged throughout human history.

Graves' research was taken up in the early 1990s by management theorists Chris Cowan and Don Beck, who adapted his work into a theory of values development they called Spiral Dynamics (1996). Beck and Cowan added new concepts such as memes – self-propagating ideas, habits, or cultural practices – and created a color scheme to represent the eight specific value systems Graves originally identified:

1. *Beige*, Archaic Values: physical survival, preservation of the clan.
2. *Purple*, Magical Values: tribal kinship groups, animistic worldviews.
3. *Red*, Power Values: deriving from social groups headed by divine kings, feudal lords, strong men, or charismatic leaders.
4. *Blue*, Mythic Values: transcendent orders, absolute gods, revealed truths, literally interpreted myth and scripture; the basis of traditional empires and kingdoms.
5. *Orange*, Rational Values: empirical science, universal reason, human rights, evidence, democratic values; the basis of modernity.
6. *Green*, Pluralistic Values: relativistic truth, multicultural values, environmental values, cultural sensitivity, focus on power and oppression; the basis of postmodernity.
7. *Yellow*, Holistic Values: integrative, evolutionary, systems view.
8. *Turquoise*, Global Values: dialectical, post-formal, transpersonal view.

An individual "unfolds" these value systems in a similar way that entire societies have, over many centuries, unfolded these same systems. Although development is complex and organic, each individual at any given time expresses values around a developmental center-of-gravity. Each cultural group also expresses its own values center-of-gravity. Larger collectives, such as large countries, are made up of subgroups from all levels; in the U.S. for example one finds *Red* gangs, *Blue* religious sects, *Orange* corporations, and *Green* NGOs.

Spiral Dynamics notes two major evolutionary breaks or leaps. Between *Blue* and *Orange* lies the important difference between ethnocentric values (such as Sharia Law, Biblical fundamentalism, justifications of slavery) and worldcentric values (such as Ahimsa-nonviolence, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Another break is between *Green* and *Yellow* or First Tier and Second Tier. First Tier systems, *Beige* to *Green*, are each characterized by a type of worldview polarization where two sets of values exist, *my/our* (right) values and all other (wrong) values. Second Tier systems are those whose values understand and include all the First Tier value systems in a growth hierarchy of relative worth.

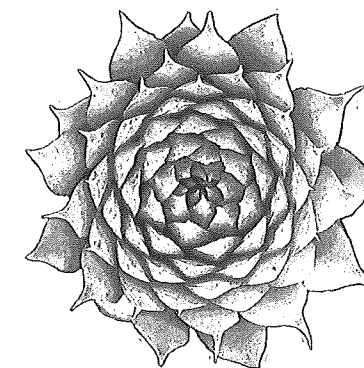
Spiral Dynamics brings invaluable perspectives to the understanding of human systems.

Blaine Snow

Practices

Understanding the Nature of Oppression

When we perceive the complexity and systematic nature of oppression, as illustrated in Marilyn Frye's image of the birdcage (1983), it doesn't make sense to tell those marginalized by institutionalized inequality to cope based only on part of the system. With a birdcage, each single strand fails to prevent movement when systematically set up to do so in all directions, not because of the strength of the metal but because of the way that all the different strands work together. One important practice for both Agent group members and Target group members is to continually remind ourselves that the parts of oppression we are able to perceive may deceive us. Metaphors such as the birdcage are useful reminders that limited access, restricted movement, defeating conditioning, and constant Agent-supremacist and Target-devaluing messages are at work influencing every aspect of each of our lives.



Oppression and Conditioning

Target Conditioning

Target group members are conditioned not to notice the bars of the cage, the invisible walls, not to notice inequities or oppression. Learning not to notice is essential to Survival. Target group members often don't realize that the Rank system is operating. Where we carry Target Rank, we too need to wake up, to become aware of the dynamics of oppression.

If we are fully in-role as members of socially devalued groups, we are unconscious of the walls and barriers that restrict our movement. We will go through the process of internalizing oppression and normalizing the dynamic of inequity. As Target group members using Survival and Confusion skills, we may say things like, "I've never experienced sexism. You must be one of those angry feminists," or "I don't get any prejudice, because I just don't believe in that stuff. I just don't think about it."

This disconnection is a function of staying unconscious. When we are in-role as members of socially devalued groups, we are unconscious of inequities and operating out of internalized oppression. When we wake up to the reality of oppression, there may be overwhelming rage, grief, backlash, penalization, and resistance from other people in our environment. While emerging an anti-oppressive consciousness as members of Target groups is the key to liberation, there are also significant costs.

I have a gas-efficient car and I only have to fill it up about once every other week and sometimes my husband fills it up so it is not something I really think about much; I just drive. Last week, my car was in the shop for a couple of days, so I drove my husband's truck, which is not very gas efficient. Every couple of days, the red light came on and started beeping at me. I kept having to fill it up and I was much more aware of it throughout my days. It made me think about how Agent membership is like driving around in the world with a car that is always full of gas. One does not have to think about it, put energy towards it, or deal with the hassle. Targetship is like driving around in cars where the red light is always on and they are constantly reminded of this fact, having to put a lot of energy into every move while maneuvering through life's obstacles. As Agent group members, we say things to members of Target groups like "the world is open to you," when, in reality, Agent and Target group members drive two entirely different vehicles.

Jen Knopp

Agent Conditioning

As members of groups that are over-valued, we are conditioned to not notice the advantages, benefits, and privileges granted to our group. We walk in the world assuming that our own experience is similar to the experience of members of socially devalued groups. If it looks like an open hallway, it is an open hallway. If we don't see a wall, we're conditioned to assume there is no wall. This makes it difficult to communicate clearly with a person whose experience differs from ours.

Part of the conditioning to the Agent role is to be unconscious of restrictions that apply to members of Target groups and not to ourselves. Another part is to assume that our perception is the right one. When we are fully in-role as members of Agent groups, we won't see the barriers of oppression and we won't believe reports from people who are standing behind them. We may consciously desire to talk about an issue of oppression, but will maintain an intellectual supremacy that implicitly says, "If I can't see it, it's not real."

As Agent group members, we are conditioned to imagine that what we perceive is accurate, that it is the complete story. When fully in-role – that is, when using Indifference, Distancing, and Inclusion skills – as unconscious Agent group members, we fail to notice that the Rank system is operating at all. As members of an Agent group, we may become motivated to do something about the injustices that make sense to us, but we will not likely be motivated to do something about injustices that we can't see or believe in. When someone calls our attention to the Rank system, we may even see ourselves as unfairly treated, left out, or unjustly judged.

Agent conditioning is characterized by freedom of movement. It's seeing ourselves as normal or mainstream. As Agent group members we tell ourselves, "Life works, and I work." A member of an Agent group who thinks of oppression as a personal choice or behavior believes that all we have to do is either avoid being oppressive or embolden ourselves to resist oppression. But Rank is systemic; it is operating in our conditioning and throughout our environment. It's not something we can eradicate simply by making changes in our attitude.

Many of us, especially those with a background in education or psychology or social action, have learned to scrutinize ourselves for "isms." We look at ourselves with a mental flashlight: "Am I classist? I want to make certain I'm never classist." We learn to be careful, to avoid saying classist words or doing classist things or thinking classist thoughts. We may think that this will prevent the walls of classism from existing at all. We may even say, "I'm not classist." Since this isn't how the system works, this kind of self-scrutiny or "flashlight work" may actually make us less aware of how classism operates and what we can do about it.

A member of an Agent group can be unconsciously oppressive, consciously oppressive, or consciously anti-oppressive. There's no such thing as being unconsciously anti-oppressive. It can become more and more natural to recognize and work against oppression, but it's not something that comes easily because our default programming is in line with the dynamics of oppression. A member of an Agent group who is using the Indifference, Distancing, or Inclusion skills when encountering messages from Target group members that point to inequality may label them as "overly sensitive." This response will be automatic, a reaction rather than a thoughtful response. It is this tendency to dismiss Target group voices that makes communication between Target group and Agent group members so difficult.

When it comes to liberation work, there is no neutral setting. An unconscious Agent can become conscious, and begin a process of change. The first step to becoming conscious is to notice areas where we have Agent group membership and acknowledge that privileges come with those. We can't get rid of privilege, only notice it and strive to use it in anti-oppressive ways. As an unconscious Target group member, we can become conscious and grow our resistance musculature. While painful, there is also felt liberation in beginning the journey to a Target-valuing life.

For people who have both Agent and Target group memberships (most people), begin with the work of Agent group anti-oppression. Members of the Agent group, by definition, have more influence on social institutions than those with Target group membership. As aware Agent group members, we can use our privilege in an anti-oppressive way. This can be of great practical use to people who are also Target group members. It is often easier to be effective and comfortable in a given situation by keeping the Rank channel tuned to those areas where we are socially over-valued.

Rank Awareness Practices: Naming and Listening

Awareness of Rank is critical to liberating ourselves and each other. Developing this Awareness is a life-long project, an ongoing process of waking up that helps us reach the anti-oppressive skill sets.

We can use the Agent and Target skills models to examine what is going on at the Rank layer of social dynamics only in a given moment. The models don't work to make a broad assessment of what phase of development a person may be "in." When using the skill models, always take a "snapshot" of a given moment, and look at what is happening right then. If watching a movie, stop the film and discuss what's happening in a specific moment, or go through a scene moment-by-moment and see how the access to skills changes.

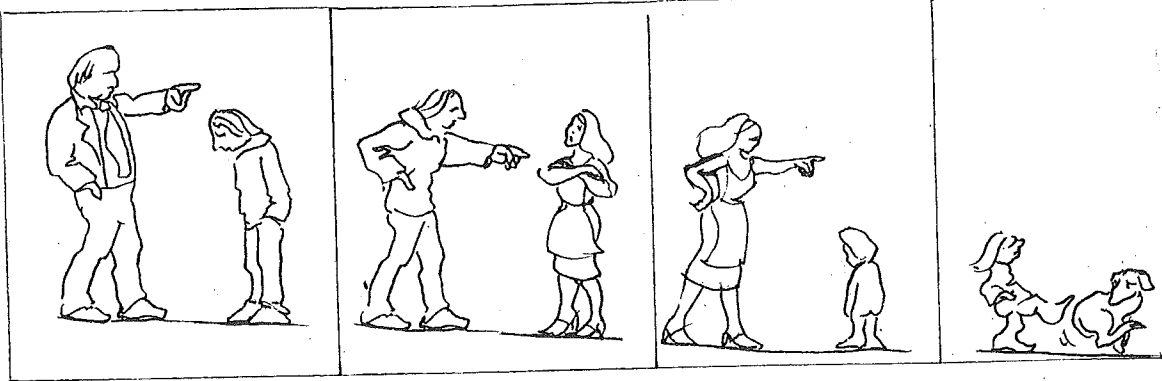
A member of an Agent group can be unconsciously oppressive, consciously oppressive, or consciously anti-oppressive.

The Psychological Function of Oppression.

The psychological function of oppression is to relieve stress for members of Agent groups. It's based on the ability to take all the things about ourselves that we don't like, and locate them in someone else, a mechanism which psychologists call "projection." Then we tend to negate the other person, or dehumanize them, or destroy them, to make ourselves feel better.

We often hear questions about how it can be that a member of a Target group in one area – knowing what it's like to be a Target – can operate with unconsciousness of Rank and exhibit discriminatory attitudes in an area where they hold Agent Rank. It would seem to many that the opposite would be true, that experiencing Target Rank in one area would automatically sensitize us to the experience of Target group members in areas where we hold Agent group membership. Unfortunately, not only is it not the case that being a Target group member automatically sensitizes us, in fact, experiences of marginalization in areas of Target group membership may result in even more unconscious oppressiveness in areas where we hold Agent group membership. This relates to the psychological function of oppression. Socialization as Agent group members includes an unconscious habit of relieving our stress by activating supremacist thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Since we all have multiple social memberships, the people with the most Agent areas have the most opportunities to relieve stress by shifting it to Targets. People with many Target areas are likely to experience the impact of Agent group members' stress many times a day. As we've indicated, we will often take the stress we receive in a Target area, and express it in an area where we have Agent group membership. This dynamic means that stress, expressed as anger, criticism, or hostility, will often cascade through a workplace, family, or any group until it lands on the persons with most Target group memberships.



Marina Shubina Woodall

Here are some practices to keep developing awareness of Rank and the skill sets. Some of these will be clear by now – you may have already started to use them as you've been reading. Others are discussed in more detail below.

- In your daily life, practice naming to yourself (mainly) and to others (selectively and choice-fully) the Agent and Target Rank roles that you and others carry.
- Practice noticing how your perception of Status play is affected by your Awareness of Rank.
- Practice listening to other people while holding in your mind the Rank roles that you and they carry. Don't try to explain this to the other person – focus on listening. How is their experience different from yours? How is it similar?
- Analyze the Rank memberships of fictional characters or characters of your own imagination, and notice how their life conditions are affected each time an Agent or Target Rank is assigned. Use this exercise to work on curiosity, inquiry, and acceptance of the realities and complexities of oppression.
- Practice noticing when Agent group members (yourself and others) "pull Rank" by communicating Agent supremacy in verbal or non-verbal ways. Pay special attention to instances when the overt (maybe verbal) messages (primary process) are neutral or anti-oppressive while the covert (maybe non-verbal, maybe unconscious) messages (secondary process) are oppressive and supremacist.
- Practice noticing how different combinations of Agent-Target interactions appear to you (and what outcomes occur) when Agent group members are exhibiting various Agent skills. Try with both real-life events and scenes from films, books, and drama.
- Practice noticing how different combinations of Agent-Target interaction appear to you (and what outcomes occur) when Target group members are exhibiting various Target skills. Try with both real-life events and scenes from films, books, and drama.
- Practice noticing what conditions facilitate Agent group members' movement from one Agent skill set to the next. Pay special attention to how consciousness-raising conditions tend to facilitate Agent group members' movement from Indifference skills to Distancing skills. (This development may result in conflict.)
- Practice noticing what conditions facilitate Targets' movement from one skill position to the next. Pay special attention to how Empowered, Target-only space tends to facilitate Targets' movement from Confusion skills to Empowerment skills. (This development may result in increased verbal critique by members of Target groups of Agent groups and Agent systems.)

Exercise: Interviewing someone about their Target group membership

Choose an area where you hold Agent membership and would like to learn more about the experience of being a member of the Target group.

Ask a person who holds Target membership in that area if you can interview them about their experience. When you find someone who agrees to this process, spend some time with her or him in a quiet, comfortable place. Ask them about their experiences. Practice really listening, acknowledging that you don't know what it's like, staying with whatever feelings come up. Avoid changing the channel to areas where you have Targetship, or finding things that you have experienced that seem similar to the Target's experience (Inclusion skills). Notice the reactions that you have. Paying attention to the Target group member and their experience, and allowing your own reactions without trying to fix or change them, will help build your own Awareness skills.

Thank the person for their help. If it seems appropriate, you might want to spend some time with this person doing something more enjoyable. Make sure that you get some good support before and after this exercise; it will be challenging.

- In a channel where you hold Target membership, interview someone who shares your Target membership and whom you perceive to have a wider skills range than your own or an ability to use the anti-oppressive skills with greater frequency.
- In a channel where you hold Agent membership, interview someone about their experience of Target group membership.

Shifting Skill Sets (for ourselves and others)

In the course of a day, we may use all the skills available in our range. If, as members of an Agent group, our skills range is limited to the first two skills in the Agent skills model, Indifference and Distancing, then we will approach situations where we encounter difference from only an Indifference or Distancing position. If, as members of a Target group, our skills range is limited to the first two skills in the Target model, Survival and Confusion, then our responses to incidents of marginalization and oppression will be to do whatever we can do to survive those incidents – including not being aware of them – or to be confused. Even when our skills range is much wider – when it includes all five skills in both models – in the course of a day, we are guaranteed to use mostly foundational skills requiring less energy, and we are not guaranteed to use skills at the top of our range.

How do we cope with this disheartening reality? How do we make peace with the knowledge that no matter how hard we work at evolving anti-oppression skills, we are certain to still use skills that are oppressive?

One way is to redefine what liberation means. It does not mean that we have become entirely free of oppressive conditioning or that we are able to think, speak and act in exclusively anti-oppressive ways. Remembering the object relations metaphors from earlier in this book, we suggest that anti-oppression can be defined as the ability to be *in relationship with* the realities of injustice, supremacy, systematic devaluing, and unearned advantage. This is a dialectic. It is a willingness to engage in social analysis of ourselves and our contexts and an ever-increasing readiness to think, speak, and act in anti-oppressive ways. Paradoxically, to achieve this, we need to adopt a welcoming and open stance towards the skills that emerge in us and others around us. It is this gentle but persistent midwifery that can result in deep forward-moving change. Rigid, judgmental, harsh attitudes toward ourselves and others tend to serve oppression as they can overhold or even regress development.

Imagine you are walking down the street as a member of the Agent group and you see a member of a Target group walking toward you. Before you know it, you've crossed the street. And then you notice what you did: "Look at me, I just did the Distancing thing. I'm so bad." You might want to punish yourself, and invite others to see how terrible you are too. But this is not useful. Instead, imagine saying to yourself "I'm using Distancing skills right now. That is part of my conditioning. I have been heavily conditioned to do this. I choose to

use Inclusion skills because I know that's the next step." Imagine going back across the street and when you come near that person imagine the exchange of a greeting. Imagine yourself noticing what you have in common with that person. Imagine a feeling of connection and comfort. You know now you've successfully used Inclusion skills. Even as you observe yourself using Inclusion skills, the possibility of Awareness may begin to emerge. As you continue to walk down the street, imagine a shift in the comforting feeling you had to a dawning realization of the uneven ease of your life as a member of the Agent group.

When you encounter another Target group member in the next block, you may be more able to begin the interaction from the Inclusion point of view that focuses on commonality, able to show up for them, to be fully present and make real contact. Moving ever more fluidly between the skill sets requires recognizing these internal states as well as naming them without demonizing them. We don't have to love these foundational skill sets, but we can do this work only when we are able to notice them without a lot of negative judgment.

The ability to notice skill sets without judging gives us a chance to move away from the politically-correct-police behavior where we try to bust other people for demonstrating Indifference or Distancing skills. This can happen as we initially make a commitment to anti-oppression. We find ourselves noticing oppression. We may name it loudly, to ourselves and others. Attacking or criticizing our fellow Agent group members is likely to make them defensive and add to their stress level. Stress tends to make people revert to simpler skill sets, so our well-meant criticism might actually push another person into an even less resourced skill base. This is obviously not what we want. The question is: How can we attend to the consciousness of that person to help facilitate the next skill set? Let us commit to the labor-intensive, life-long task of building relationships that form the context for, rather than are ended by, transformative conflict.

Allies identify members of their own Agent group who are available for mentoring and take them on, not in an adversarial or condescending way, but taking seriously the crucial work of relationship for social change.

Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, short-sighted, and short-lived advancement for a few. Freedom is indivisible, and either we are working for freedom or you are working for the sake of your self-interest and I am working for mine.

June Jordan (2002, p. 133)

FAQ

When Target group members tell me there is no such thing as the oppression involving them, what do I do? (Asked by Agent group members.)

Listen carefully. You are probably hearing Survival skills. Remember – the central purpose of Survival skills is to say and do anything that makes Agent group members more comfortable and to do so unconsciously. A Target group member may deny the existence of oppression either because their skills range is limited, because they are experiencing stress and their skills access is reduced, or because they have picked up on your stress and are over-functioning to try to make you comfortable.

It's a great life if you don't weaken," my fly-fisher father would say. All manner of creatures nibbled at that line he cast religiously into the waters of my childhood. The one with the biggest teeth was Independence – a slippery thing that swayed around like it had no parentage.

I am named for two very strong women, one great grandmother from each side – Mattie Collier and Lora Miller. Both were widowed homesteaders in New Mexico in an era in which women going alone were an anomaly. Lora established one of the first post offices in New Mexico. On the day she submitted the paperwork they asked her to name the town. "Crossroads," she said, for the meeting of tracks in the earth there. So goes one of our great family stories of independence and fortitude. – Or was it? What was the land of Crossroads, NM called before my great grandmother settled there? As a child hearing Lora Miller's story I vividly saw her planting a pitchfork into the soil with one strong arm, the first person to ever look out toward that land's horizon. In truth, hers was a part of a colonialist story, a story of dependence. The Homestead Act: welfare for settlers at the expense of indigenous people.

I discovered recently that my not-too-distant Collier ancestors had enslaved two African American women. Turns out, my people's history (and present) is braided with the lives of people who were (and are) deeply exploited. Countless underlying dependencies are busy holding up the illusion that we are self-reliant. Toni Morrison writes to Black women, "Anybody who does not know your history doesn't know their own and must answer for that" (1996, p.123). James Baldwin too: "If I'm not what I've been told I am, then it means that you're not what you thought you were either! And that is the crisis" (1988, p.8). Salient omissions in my family history, replaced with stories of self-made heroes, reveal our value for independence. We like to imagine that what we've accomplished has been of our own making, which keeps us from feeling the true foundation of our economic and social lives. Thus, acknowledging oppression becomes a rigorous self-awareness practice.

Trying to get myself, my family, and members of our race and class culture to recognize our negative dependencies (as with slavery or colonization) and to cultivate positive dependencies (like reaching out to one another for support or joining in shared struggles) is like casting new lines into the water that no one seems at first to want to bite at. Still, as culture is alive, I see evidence of growth. That oft-repeated quotation my dad loves, "it's a great life if you don't weaken" was given an addendum some number of years ago: "and it's a pretty good life, even if you do." His sixty year old hands tie the first line to the second like he knows it's the only way to catch the fish that swim in colder, deeper waters...ones that are most worthy of dinner.

Laurel Collier Smith
Ethnicity, Social Class Culture, and Indigenous Heritage Agent Group Member

Incident Analysis and Response Tools

The tools here are specific approaches that enable a clearer understanding of a specific incident, and some that can be used to facilitate shifts in skill sets in real life. The analysis tool is a way to understand the Status, Rank, and Power dynamics. We recommend that anyone interested in effective intervention practice with the analysis tool, in a variety of fictional and real life situations. Regular practice will enable you to analyze real situations quickly and effectively, which is key to making interventions.

Channels and Channel Changing

We use the term "channels" to talk about the different areas of Rank membership, especially to examine how in a given interaction, some Rank areas will be highlighted while others are less apparent and may seem unrelated to the exchange at hand. While we all carry membership in all nine Rank categories, we will often find ourselves working in one area at a time. When analyzing incidents, whether on film or in real life, it is possible to notice which Rank areas are in the foreground and which are in the background. Intense scenes are often characterized by the highlighting of one or two Rank areas.

Imagine a conversation where suddenly an explicit reference to a Rank area is made. For example, a man and a woman are discussing the weather. When the man prefaces his next statement with the phrase "little lady," now the gender channel has become charged. It's not that sexism was absent from the interaction before that statement or that the two people were free from gender conditioning. Rather, the invoking of specific membership has now begun to shape the interaction in a different way. The remaining eight areas of Rank membership – age, disability, religious culture, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, and national origin – were all present and continue to be present in the interaction. But, after the "little lady" comment, gender seems highlighted.

Another dynamic to be aware of is that we tend to tune in certain channels over others and may perceive many situations through the lens of our pet channel.

Changing the channel is a type of Status move, and can be used by anyone, with a variety of motivations and degrees of consciousness. It can be truly accidental – a function of language – a word that sounds similar to the Rank word such as "juice" (Jews/religious culture.) It can be unconscious, reflecting Rank role programming – a charged word hurled in an argument such as "honey" (gender). For example, a middle-class woman is naming classism with a middle-class man. When he addresses her as honey, he changes the channel to gender. An especially common and difficult example of channel-

The incident reminds the Target group member of the "ism," even when what happened was an accident or mistake.

Reminders for Deep Listening Process

Confirmation:
Holding well, curiosity, establishing climate, witness

Contradiction:
Letting go
Initiate the encounter, still witness

Continuity:
Staying put, witness

Closure:
Transition out, witness

based on Teaching for Diversity & Social Justice (Adams et al., 1997).

age
 disability
 religious culture
 ethnicity
 sexual orientation
 social class
 culture
 indigenous
 Heritage
 national
 origin
 gender

FAQ
**FAQ: How come some people
 can use certain words and
 some can't?**

When members of Target groups use words that have been historically used against their group, they can sometimes achieve conditions that result in a Status interaction that can be affirming, such as reclaiming the word or de-powering the word from its harmful meaning. This feels like neutralizing gravity just a little bit, like bouncing off the ground weightlessly.

changing is when anti-oppression educators use a charged term in order to warn people not to use it. Changing the channel can be done deliberately, with hostile intent, meant to provoke. And channel changing can be a deliberate action, mindfully used, aimed at defusing tension or inspiring a productive dialogue.

One typical type of channel changing is an expression of anger or frustration that heightens conflict and creates an incident. An Agent group member might do this, consciously or unconsciously, to assert control or to displace stress onto a member of the Target group. It might be a deliberate provocation, or a nearly unconscious one, but the effect is the same.

A person in a Target position might change the channel while using Survival skills, conforming to the Agent stereotype about the Target. It could also be an exercise of Empowerment skills, raising the issue of Rank and forcing Agent group members to deal with it. This type of channel changing can be dangerous for the Target group member, depending on the skills available to the Agent group member in the interaction.

Channel changing can also be used to shift attention away from a charged area and towards an area of shared Target or Agent group membership. This is one way that members of both Agent and Target groups can change a situation, diffusing conflict or moving toward a more balanced interaction. For example, if a college student uses a negative word aimed at a teacher's Target gender, the teacher might "change the channel" to social class, where she and the student have shared Agent group membership. She can say, for example, "Can you remind me of the website for the hybrid car you like?" This could move the discussion away from an open conflict, and give the teacher a chance to regroup and consider responses to the name-calling.

There are several ways to change the channel. The most obvious is for a person to name the area of Rank that they want to highlight, either simply by stating that the Rank difference exists or by using strong or hurtful language to bring it up. A more subtle way to channel change might be to draw upon Strategy/Re-Centering skills, or Awareness/Allyship skills, and shift focus toward the Rank area by using the language, style, or consciousness associated with it. For example, formal, professional, or bureaucratic language can change the channel to social class. A reference to one's family relationships could be used to change the channel to gender or age or sexual orientation. Use of a linguistic style or physical gesture associated with a particular ethnic group can shift the channel to ethnicity. Reference to a religious holiday can shift the channel to religious culture.

One channel-changing tendency that we want to address is when an Agent group member using Inclusion skills changes the channel to an area where they hold Target group membership as a subconscious way to avoid Awareness. Imagine that a European American person and a Person of Color are in conversation about racism and the Person of Color has begun to use their

Empowered voice. If, in that moment, the European American person begins to speak about their sexual orientation Targetship, they will unconsciously be shifting the conversation away from what could be a liberation moment. It's particularly important, when having conversations about an area of Agent membership, to stay tuned in to the channel, or ADDRESSING area, where we hold Agent Rank.

Channel changing can be done unconsciously or deliberately, by Target or Agent group members, in the service of oppression or in the pursuit of anti-oppression. Becoming conscious of what areas are charged, and developing skills for changing channels when needed, can help people who seek anti-oppression outcomes to achieve their ends.

**Exercise: Film Analysis
 Observing Channels and Channel Changing**

Watch a film that includes issues of diversity and difference. Possibilities include:

Brokeback Mountain (Lee, A, 2005)
Crash (Haggis, 2004)
Daughters of the Dust (Dash, 1991)
Focus (Slavin, 2001)
Grand Canyon (Kasdan & Kasdan, 1991)
The House of Sand and Fog (Perelman, 2003)
Lone Star (Sayles, 1996)
The Long Walk Home (Pearce, 1990)
Losing Isaiah (Gyllenhaal, 1995)
Mi Familia (Nava, 1995)
Passion Fish (Sayles, 1992)
Smoke Signals (Eyre & Alexie, 1998)
Snow Falling on Cedars (Hicks, 1999)
Transamerica (Tucker, 2005)

...and many others. Periodically stop the film, especially during scenes of conflict, and analyze what channel is activated in that moment of the film. Bear in mind that a channel can be activated one moment, and the next moment the channel can change to a different one.

Features of oppression

Oppression is Pervasive:

Social inequity is woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. It's always present. It's everywhere.

Oppression is Restricting:

Oppression denotes structural and material constraints that significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility. It restricts what a person can do.

Oppression generates complex, multiple, cross-cutting limitations:

Comfort and privilege are relative because individuals hold multiple social group memberships. Sometimes this makes it appear that oppression operates on a continuum.

Oppression is Internalized:

Oppression resides not only in external social institutions and norms, but also within the human psyche. Oppressive beliefs and misinformation are internalized by members of both Target and Agent groups. The external cage is also an internal cage.

Oppression is Hierarchically Dualistic:

Hierarchically: Dominant or privileged groups benefit, often in ways they are not conscious of, from the disempowerment of subordinate or Targeted groups.

Dualistic: It has only two possibilities: Agent and Target. It's not a continuum. There's no in-between position.

Oppression is not situational:

Agent and Target roles have a high degree of constancy and continuity. They don't change moment-to-moment or situation-to-situation as Status does.

When a person has Agent Rank, their Rank remains Agent even if they are outnumbered, uncomfortable, at risk of, or experiencing Status loss.

Based on Lee Anne Bell in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (1997)

**Deep Listening Intervention:
An Agent-to-Agent response**

This intervention can be used to help another Agent group member move from Distancing to Inclusion or from Inclusion to Awareness. This work is done mostly Agent-to-Agent; we recommend doing this with a person who, like you, is unfairly advantaged in the Rank category where you are working. For example, if you are working with an adult who makes a bigoted statement about youth, both of you would be adults (age Agents). If a member of Christendom makes a bigoted remark about members of another religious culture, this intervention would work best if you are also a member of Christendom.

This process can be especially effective with a person who appears to be using Distancing or Inclusion skills, and can facilitate movement to the next skill set. Because the process demands commitment to the Agent group member you are intervening with, this is not an appropriate choice for casual acquaintances or people you dislike. It works best with people with whom you have an ongoing relationship (or are willing to build one), and some degree of genuine caring and concern.

The goals of the process are to respond to an oppressive action or statement, to have empathy for your fellow Agent group member and understand what they believe, to stay in relationship with the Agent group member, to register a different point of view, and to create opportunity for them to change. Usually the intervention is a response to an oppressive or bigoted statement by the fellow Agent. When you decide to do a deep listening intervention, slow down, breathe, and think before you react.

First, listen for the feelings expressed by the Agent group member. Using active listening techniques, restate what the Agent group member says to let them know that you have heard them and recognize their distress. What you are looking for is an affirmative response. Your job is to get a full-bodied "yes" from them – they fully resonate with your restatement, and this is plain from their words, their voice, and their body language. This full-bodied resonance is called a "yes set." It signals that the person you are listening to is feeling increasingly heard and understood.

Continue the conversation, asking brief questions and making comments as necessary to keep the Agent group member talking about the Target group and his or her feelings about that group. Continue to use active listening techniques, and notice each time you get a "yes set" from the other Agent. The conversation should continue until you have identified fifteen separate "yes sets" from the Agent group member. This takes a great deal of commitment from the intervening Agent. It's essential to stay fully present and to show genuine interest and empathy for the Agent group member's experience. Affirm the feelings they have without affirming the content of their prejudice.

Tu eres
mi otro
yo.
(you are
my
other
me.)

Dr. Nieto told us that Allyship is labor-intensive work that consists of patiently building relationships with fellow Agents over a period of time. It requires patience and empathy and willingness to listen to offensive remarks and hear and validate the fear underneath. This was so disappointing, but necessary, for me to hear.

Amanda Morstad

Acknowledge their distress, worry, fear, or anger toward the Target group. The feelings are real, even if their explanation for those feelings is founded in untruth.

When you have gotten the full fifteen or more “yes sets,” you can ask the Agent group member to confirm that they feel heard and understood. You might ask, “Do you feel like I get where you’re coming from? Is there any part of this that you feel I don’t get?” Ideally, the Agent group member will be able to affirm that you do understand their point of view. If there’s anything half-hearted about their statement, continue to listen until they absolutely affirm that you have heard and understood them.

Once the Agent group member has confirmed that they feel fully heard, you have earned the right to offer some challenge. Your final steps are to re-affirm your commitment to the person and your connection with them, to let them know that you don’t agree with their view, and to end the conversation. This should be done briefly and matter-of-factly, without criticism or anger. You might say, “I’m glad we had this conversation. I care about you and I want to support you. And I have to tell you that I have some disagreements.” After they reply, move to end the interaction gently but clearly. It is important that you yourself are not activated or distressed. “I’d be happy to talk to you more about this at another time, but now I have to go.” Don’t let it turn into an argument.

This is the entire intervention. The purpose is to listen well enough to the underlying feelings, and to let the bigotry come out until you sense that this person is ready for a piece of new information. The new information is that a credible person has listened with depth and interest and has expressed disagreement. For this intervention to be most effective, it is best not to outline or explain what the disagreement is in that same moment. When done well, even artfully, this intervention is characterized by compassion and it invites conditions for self-reflection. The person may have thoughts such as “I wonder what part of what I said my friend disagrees with.” This is a very productive and growth-inducing question.

It’s not possible to reason with Distancing skills. But when we affirm someone’s feelings and show authentic compassion for their distress, that person may relax and let us in. They might continue to vent throughout the interaction; they might reveal very deep fears and painful incidents that are connected to their attitudes. When they do feel heard, this might be the first time in their lives that they have really spoken about long-held, hardened beliefs and attitudes. This, in itself, can be transforming. They might hear themselves saying things and later question whether they really do believe that.

The intervener should keep their disagreement matter-of-fact and even casual, without explaining, arguing, or giving reasons. A gentle comment like “I disagree with you,” or “I don’t see it that way,” or “I don’t believe that,” sets

up a dialogue in the other person’s mind. This inner dialogue will continue, possibly for days or weeks. It is the self-dialogue, the process of inner questioning, that can move the Agent group member toward a new skill set.

This method of intervention is counter-intuitive. Usually, when we as Agent group members sense bigotry in another person carrying Agent Rank, we are all too eager to engage them in a discussion or argument about how wrong they are. This leads to a defensive escalation of the original bigotry, and frequently to an expansion of the bigoted attitude to include ourselves. “Oh, you’re just like those people!” Our desire to demonstrate our anti-oppressive finesse and enlightened attitudes actually can prevent the emergence of new skills.

Effective anti-oppression work is more often about leaning in than about pointing out errors and critiquing wrong attitudes. By building a trustful relationship, we infect the other person’s consciousness with our own credibility. This is difficult work. It requires tremendous compassion for ourselves and for our friend who carries bigoted attitudes, and it needs a lifelong commitment to the process of dismantling the systems of oppression.

The goal of deep listening is to build credibility, not to shame or hurt the person we work with. It’s more effective than shaming people. Our authentic presence with the person we talk with, and our belief in their capacity to liberate themselves, plant the seed that will grow over time.

Distancing skills feel uncomfortable. People ask us to affirm their negative evaluations of Target groups because they want to be more comfortable with those negative evaluations. By not affirming those evaluations, yet making it easier for our friend to shift to using Inclusion, we make real change possible. Even if our efforts at deep listening are flawed, they will be more productive than ignoring bigotry or pointing fingers at other people and telling them how wrong they are. The key to deep listening and other anti-oppressive interventions is the recognition that we contain the same misinformation and supremacist conditioning as the person we are talking with. In offering a liberatory opportunity to another, we are also engaged in liberating ourselves.

Leticia Nieto

My arrogant, pitiful voice squeaks
and the echo comes back bells
because you heard me.

FAQ**What to do about inappropriate language in workplaces or schools?**

Many communities end up addressing the "problem" in behavioral terms.

Problematic behaviors or words, and how to extinguish them, prevent them, and deal with them, are defined in terms of certain types of behaviors: high Status moves. While it makes sense to articulate social contracts of behavioral expectations in schools and workplaces, the result of such an approach is often to establish restrictive, so-called politically correct, repressive environments where problematic attitudes do not change, they simply go further underground.

How to do a Listening Intervention

The listening intervention is a strategy for responding to an oppressive action or an incident in a way that is respectful and empathic to the person who did the action, giving them an opportunity to express their feelings. It allows the intervening person to stay in relationship with the person who did the action, and to truly understand that person. This intervention is not about "busting" someone for saying the wrong thing, but giving them an opportunity to be truly heard and, ultimately, to change.

This process is based on an objects relations model of relationship that moves from attachment, to separation, to integration. Here, in a sequence identified by Robert Kegan (1982), the process opens with confirmation of a person's reality, and of the intervenor's relationship with the person. The next move is a moment of contradiction – pointing out the difference between the views of the two individuals. Finally, the intervenor offers continuity, an opportunity for the relationship to continue, and for the person to integrate the new information that has been offered.

In confirmation, the first part of the intervention, we practice authentic listening. We start with our genuine curiosity about the other person, and aim to fully understand the underlying beliefs and feelings behind the original action. We may dislike the action, but we care about the person. We know that this particular action represents one moment in time, and that the person who acted oppressively is capable of growth and change.

As we practice confirmation, we ask questions about the person's feelings and beliefs, looking for the meaning behind the original action. We want to hear the person. We look them in the eye. We might say:

- What did you mean?
- I'm curious about what you said...
- Tell me more about...
- It sounds like your experience has been that...
- How do you feel about...

As they answer, we respond empathically, paraphrasing what they said, checking to see if we got it. We rephrase, ask follow-up questions, and name the underlying emotions that we hear. Our goal is to get a genuine "yes"

answer, not only a verbal agreement, but a full-bodied resonance. This could sound like:

- Do you mean that...?
- It sounds like you feel...
- When that happened, were you thinking about...?
- In the past, you've had _____ happen to you...?
- So, what you're saying is...?

As we continue the conversation, we notice when the person says "yes!" We want to get a lot of these yes sets – our goal is fifteen. We remember that we care about the person. We are not arguing or trying to tell them what to think, but rather giving them a chance to fully air their feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. Some of these attitudes may be very entrenched, reflecting memories that the person has been holding inside for their whole lives. Our position is that of a supportive friend, which does not mean that we endorse their specific views. If we feel uncomfortable, we remind ourselves that our goal is to help the person, not to agree or disagree. We relax, keep breathing, keep listening.

If the conversation seems to be going in circles, we can regroup by summarizing what's been said. We check to see if the person wants to add anything. We might say:

- Do you think I get what you're saying?
- I think you're saying... Is that right?
- Does it seem like I understand your point?

That's the confirmation phase. We know we're done when the person fully agrees that we get their point. They don't have anything to add. The person may be quieter. The emotions and energy have probably shifted – it feels calmer, more relaxed. They have said all that they need to say. Now we can move to the contradiction phase.

At this point we want to register two things with the person: that we value them and that we disagree. This is the contradiction phase. Our message is respectful, low-key, and not confrontational. Our tone is matter-of-fact. We want to let them know that we disagree, but not to explain, justify, or argue.

We might say something like:

- I can really understand, and I notice that I see this differently.
- I can see your point of view, and I am aware that my reaction is that _____.
- I would like you to know that I have a different view about that.
- My belief is quite different from that.
- I see it in a different way.
- My experience has been different.
- That's not true for me.
- My perception is that _____ is not the case.

We don't belabor the point here. We make our statement brief, clear, and kind. Our next move is to end the interaction, in as neutral a manner as possible, while affirming our ongoing relationship with the person. This is the continuity phase – we are ending this conversation, but anchoring the relationship and our intentions to continue the connection.

- I'm so glad we had a chance to talk. I'm heading home now. Let's talk on Thursday.
- It's been good to connect with you this way. It's time for me to go, but I'll see you tomorrow morning.
- Thanks for stopping by. I need to get to my meeting. Will you be at the party next week?

Our goal is to state our disagreement, and immediately part ways, with affirmation that we will meet again. If we cannot part ways, we clearly signal that we are moving on to another topic or task, perhaps by physically moving to a different space. We can continue the discussion in the future. Our relationship with the person, too, is a work in progress, and we offer them our personal regard – despite the incident that caused us to intervene in the first place.

This intervention is an example of a "red pill" that has the potential to help a person change over time. We leave our friend thinking about what happened, continuing the conversation in his or her mind. He might wonder "I wonder what she disagreed with" or "Why did she say that?" or "Wow, I said a lot of stuff. Do I still believe all that?" This intervention can stimulate genuine self-reflection and self-questioning, and lead to real shifts over time.

Incidents

The river of oppression is constant, but we tend to be unaware of it most of the time. As Target group members, being conscious of it all the time can be immobilizing. Where we hold Agent Rank, it's impossible to hold the realization because we can usually see only a little bit of the oppression – a single wire of the birdcage.

When an incident occurs, it disrupts our normal in-role "trance" and shows us the effect of Rank. Trance in this context refers to a state of consciousness. We can, momentarily, notice the constant "hum" of oppression. We are in a conditioned trance when we are in-role using the first three skills of the Agent model and the first two skills of the Target model. Anti-oppressive consciousness is another kind of trance state, one of heightened attention to dynamics of oppression. When we tap into the core of Power, we may experience a Power trance, one where we feel connected to or even one with everyone. These are examples of states of consciousness. The most common trance we find ourselves in is the in-role conditioned trance in which we're operating "on automatic," focusing on our own thoughts and projects, without much perception of what's going on around us. This is a normal state of mind, everyday consciousness for most of us, yet it is a "robotic" state.

Agent group members may not notice an incident unless they have access to Awareness and Allyship skills in that channel, while Target group members are more likely to. At other times, Agent Allies might notice and even point out incidents to a friend who is a member of the Target group, if the Target member is using Confusion and Survival skills in that moment.

If a Target group member has access to Empowerment skills and beyond, they may maneuver in their daily life by choosing some battles while letting many incidents go. Imagine this Target group member moving through their day, negotiating the delicate balance between noticing and not noticing oppression.

Then an incident occurs. For example, someone might use a pejorative word that refers to the Target group – although much less than this can qualify as an incident. Maybe the speaker is just quoting someone else, or using it as an example of things not to say, but the word has been spoken. The Target group member may experience a loss of ground, a kind of being washed downstream, feeling the full force of the river of oppression. The incident could be characterized as small, yet it serves to remind the Target member of a constant, pervasive pressure, which they had been momentarily disattending to. Any instance that results in the person being reminded of their Target group membership so that they must now spend additional energy returning to equilibrium, we call an incident, regardless of whether it was intentional, unintentional, accidental, or a mistake.

When this happens, members of socially advantaged groups may perceive

Any instance that results in the person being reminded of their Target group membership – so that they now must spend additional energy returning to equilibrium – we call an incident, regardless of whether it was intentional, unintentional, accidental, or a mistake.

FAQ

What to do about Status issues in the workplace?

When incidents occur in the workplace, supervisors and administrators must respond. Our suggestion is to create responses that focus on education rather than discipline. For example, if a professor with Agent group membership included a derogatory term in a lecture, we recommend requiring that person to engage in meaningful conversations with a fellow professor with the same Agent membership. The institution can use assessment approaches that allow the faculty member to demonstrate increased skills access, instead of initiating dismissal procedures.

It is important for members of Target groups to know that the leadership of an organization is behaving responsively and quickly. Communication with members of the Target group in question about a specific incident can be handled carefully, while making the commitment to individual and institutional change explicit.

Today, institutions often move in the direction of disciplining and even terminating employment, which scapegoats an individual for saying something that is said and thought by many. This does not create a more positive working environment for Target group members; it creates an environment where people avoid talking about important issues for fear of being punished, in which deeply held supremacist attitudes can become even more strongly rooted.

that the member of the socially under-valued group is having a large reaction to a small thing. The member of the Agent group, observing this situation, is likely to say, "Well, that was a bad word, but still just a word. You seem so upset. Maybe you should do something to not be so reactive. Relax." That's because the Agent group member is not aware that the incident is only an example of a devaluing process that is at work all of the time.

When we realize, as members of socially advantaged groups, that the system of oppression is always there, we can stop asking the question, "Was that racist? Was that sexist? Was that homophobic?" because we see that's an irrelevant and improper question. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other oppressions of Rank are always happening. The better question is, "Was that a particularly good example of racism? Was that a noticeable example of sexism? Is the homophobia really loud in here?"

"Was that a particularly good or useful example of the constant - systematic - institutionalized - pervasive - (yet subtle) tendency to overvalue/devalue a particular group?"

Intention Versus Impact

This brings up the issue of intention versus impact. When an incident occurs, originated by something the Agent group member said or did, it will have an impact on the Target group member. The Target group member will feel it, and react or push back. The Target group member may have their wits about them enough to be able to reveal to the member of the Agent group what just happened. The Target group member may say, "What you just said brought up this 'ism' for me, reminded me, put me in my place." Typically what happens at that moment is that the member of the Agent group responds by examining their own motivation and attempting to clarify for the Target group member their own intent. It is worth noting that incidents include not only actions by persons, but insitutional choices as well, such as a meeting being scheduled on a religious holiday.

So the member of the Agent group may say to the Target, "That's not what I meant. I'm not '____ist'; You've misunderstood me." Imagining that the "ism" is personal, that it occurs through the direct harm by one person to another, is incorrect. The Agent group member's logic says, "I'm not sexist/racist/anti-immigrant/(etc.), therefore that "ism" is not happening." But, in fact, the incident is a reminder to the Target group member of the "ism" even when the reminder is unintentional, by accident or mistake. The Agent group member and the Target group member will have had a very different experience of that moment. This is where the Agent can practice listening, honoring the Target group member as the expert on what's happening.

When we recognize the pervasive, constant, and impersonal quality of oppression and stop focusing on intention, we begin to make real changes. Instead of spending all our time as members of the Agent group convincing Target group members of how non "ist" we are, we can go right to work on addressing the impact that has just occurred to facilitate recovery. We can begin to address systematic oppression.

Another possible response to an incident is that both the member of the Agent group and the member of the Target group will equate the incident with oppression itself. They may go looking for ways to regulate and legislate against incidents, imagining that if incidents like the one that just occurred never happen again, the "ism" will no longer exist. For example, they may say, "This word is not to be used in this office. It's an oppressive word, it's hateful, and we're not going to have this word anymore." Everybody agrees. And now that we don't have the word or the behaviors or the attitudes, we believe we have neutralized oppression.

This is related to the construction of oppression as a personal issue, "your (fill in the blank) -ism." The river of oppression flows continually, and we are not and cannot be aware of it all the time. The things that catch our attention are incidents. Many responses to systematic oppression have been misguided and ineffective because they focused on incidents. Regulating or legislating or

let "impact" be your focus, the figure; of "intention" will drop back as ground.

Mistakes

We can expect in our efforts to change that everyone will make mistakes, and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning in that they create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results.

Julia Maxwell

What We Focus On Increases

Whatever we focus on will increase.

The metaphor of war or combat tends to strengthen the thing that it claims to be fighting. The “war on drugs” or the “war on crime” have not proven to be useful metaphors. If we fight Distancing we strengthen Distancing. We give it legitimacy and energy. Instead let’s focus on how Distancing skills are more ample than Indifference skills – in other words, good news. Then, we can take the next step of focusing on Inclusion skills as they emerge.

litigating about incidents cannot redress the essence of systematic oppression. Regulating incidents also drives the skill sets of Indifference, Distancing, and Inclusion underground, preventing people from discovering their limits and expanding their range with anti-oppressive skill sets. In a situation where an Agent group member and a Target group member are together and an incident occurs, the member of the Agent group may react strongly. He or she may think, “I should do something because my Target friend just got hit. I saw it. Now I’m going to go after this person who caused the incident.” This policing approach misses the mark because it fails to attend to the impact of the incident on the Target group member and also because, in overreacting, the Agent group member may send the message that the problem that needs correcting is the behavior of a person rather than the systematic, institutionalized dynamics of injustice.

Focusing on the Agent group member’s intention gets in the way of justice work, especially among coworkers or collaborators. The solution is to focus on impact rather than intention. As long as the Agent group member’s focus is on intention, then they will activate all of their role conditioning and they’ll be pulling Rank. Whenever a member of an Agent group brings in intention as the important issue in a conversation, “That was not my intention. I did not mean it that way. You are taking that wrong. You’ve misunderstood me,” they are pulling Rank. This becomes yet another incident, putting the Target group member in their place even more.

If the Agent group member focuses instead on impact, not intention, then the focus shifts away from the personal and toward the systematic nature of oppression. The Agent group member can shift focus to listening rather than defending. “Tell me more. How did that affect you? What happened just then?” Sometimes it seems to the Agent group member like the incident was tiny, and the reaction is huge. Incidents are symbols, the reminders of a dynamic that is always present. For members of socially marginalized groups, it’s one more experience of oppression, “here we go again.”

Some incidents have nothing to do with interaction or any kind of intention; they’re about authentic mistakes or functions of language. One example is to imagine a Jewish person in a store. Two aisles over there’s a box of apple juice on the floor. It’s in the wrong aisle, so the manager yells “Hey, get the juice out of here.” The Jewish person hears “get the Jews out of here” and feels the impact. The manager was talking about apple juice. There was no reference to Jewish people; it was not an anti-Semitic comment. But the Jewish person has had an impact: it was still an incident of anti-Semitism. The incident is real, regardless of the intention behind it.

So, in areas where we carry unfair advantage, we can bear this in mind when there’s an incident that affects a Target group member. Intention doesn’t matter. What matters is the impact that the Target group member felt, not the conscious intention of the Agent group member.

The anti-oppression goal is to shift our attention away from intention and

toward impact. When analyzing the incident, focus on the impact first. Did this event remind the Target group member of the fact that they are socially devalued? Did it put them “in their place?” Did it cost them ground? If so, it’s systematically in the service of oppression, regardless of why it happened. Just being willing to stay conscious of this dynamic, to recognize impact, represents a significant anti-oppressive skill.

What I
choose to
focus on
matters.

Target Empowerment & Agent Inclusion in Interpersonal Conflict

This type of conflict usually begins with an incident, which the Target group member has identified and wants to talk about, wrongly believing that the Agent group member has access to Awareness (listening) skills. The Target group member may try low-Status approaches, but in a close relationship or when there is expectation of Agent Awareness skills, will more likely try high-Status approaches like directness. High-Status approaches are more congruent with Target Empowerment skills. Target Strategy skills ordinarily utilize low Status and complex combinations of high and low Status. These would work much better in an encounter with Agent Inclusion skills, but the person carrying Target Rank may not have access to Strategy in the moment.

The Agent group member may recognize that the incident has been flagged and consciously shift from Inclusion skills ("everything is fine") to Awareness skills ("what just happened for you?"). If they do, this is likely to move the dyad to a productive, but not necessarily easy, painless, or fast, resolution. This would be the anti-oppressive outcome.

Commonly, the Agent group member may use high Status to entrench in Inclusion skills, i.e., "I don't have a problem with you, so you shouldn't have a problem." They may try to categorize the incident as merely interpersonal or even intrapersonal (psychologizing), "I don't perceive the impact; therefore this situation is all in your mind." Agent entrenchment in Inclusion skills can be a function of stress, resentment, unconscious retaliation, or other causes. It has a component of supremacy in that the Agent group member is, consciously or unconsciously, declaring themselves and the situation immune to oppressive conditions and conditioning. Believing that the Agent group member's view of the situation is necessarily the correct one is one type of pulling Rank.

At this point in the conflict, the Agent group member's entrenchment in Inclusion becomes the more immediate incident, compounding the effect of the earlier incident. When the Agent group member won't acknowledge that the first or second incident has occurred, the situation is likely to escalate. The opportunity to sort through the first incident is lost, stranding the person carrying Target Rank in a toxic situation of internalized oppression and anger. From this point forward the second (or third or fourth) incident will become the problem, compounding and covering over the first incident. Ironically, the Agent group member may actually be feeling *better*, for the affect of Inclusion is akin to a big warm hug.

The person carrying Target Rank may shift into Confusion skills, imploding, self-blaming, apologizing, and/or declaring the situation a function of their own deficiency and releasing the Agent group member from the interaction. This shows the Target group member using foundational skill sets, retreating from Empowerment, and actually becoming less aware of what's going on.

Having consciousness of unearned benefit will yield more credibility in working with Target groups. It's likely to be more useful than studying all the correct body language and words to use and all the lists of proper behavior for being culturally congruent with various groups, because none of that addresses the reality of privilege.

Such a conclusion to the conflict is the most oppressive outcome.

However, the Target group member using Empowerment skills may not easily shift to Confusion if the Empowerment skill prevents it. The Target group member may escalate with high Status moves, which may be the only way they feel they can influence the situation. They may use ever more precise blow-by-blow accounts and social analysis of the present situation, including references to the compounding incidents and exhortations to the Agent group member to shift into Awareness skills. The Target may not yet, or not at that moment, access Strategy skills. (Strategy in this situation might be to realize that the Agent group member is not available for Awareness or Allyship, and to end the interaction.)

Access to Strategy would be, for the Target group member, the best and most efficient resolution to the conflict – for Strategy would allow them to reserve energy for themselves instead of expending it on the Agent group member. However, since the incident is likely to have cost the Target group member some ground, it may be an unlikely moment to access Strategy skills, even if the Target group member has used them in other situations.

If the Target group member, with their resources now lowered from the incident, entrenches in Empowerment skills and activates high Status moves – and if the Agent, coming from Inclusion, does not or cannot shift into Awareness skills – then the Agent group member may shift into Distancing. In conflict situations, Agent Distancing often manifests as Distancing down, or active devaluing. In a group of immigration rights activists, a member of the Agent group may unconsciously finish the sentence spoken by a person for whom English is not a first language. This can drive the incident into an irresolvable lock. For the Target, this lock deepens the message of being “put in one’s place.” In other words, the Agent group member wins the conflict by pulling Rank. If this whole event took place within the context of an organization or institution, the cost to the Target member could be very high. Yet both people are dehumanized and ultimately only oppression wins.

Practicing with past incidents or films makes it easier to respond effectively in the moment the next time a critical instance arises in your life.

Agent Group Members and the Entitlement Bubble

Having unfair advantage is like taking a drug. The more we have, the more we don’t know how it affects us. Having any Agent Rank can lead to supremacist behavior and assumptions, which are almost certain to be unconscious. As members of Agent groups, we’re not aware of the supremacist messages we’re sending to those around us, but Target group members using Empowerment skills and beyond will be strongly aware of them.

It can be helpful to visualize the entitlement bubble as a space around an Agent group member that is filled with a gaseous substance like sulfur with a rotten egg smell. Privilege stinks, and the more Agent Rank I have, the bigger the bubble is. So if an Agent group member tries to work with a member of a Target group, moving in with their skills and expertise, they may be surprised when the Target group member reacts to the bad smell. This is a classic Agent Inclusion and Target Empowerment scene.

If the member of the Agent group is able to tune in Awareness, that is, consciousness about unearned advantage and privilege, the bubble will shrink. The tighter the bubble becomes, the better chance the Agent member will have to be able to get closer and work with Target group members. But the smaller the bubble is, the more intense the smell will be for the Agent member in it; they will be strongly aware of injustice.

Having consciousness of unearned benefit will yield more credibility in working with Target groups. This can lead to better outcomes on specific issues. It’s likely to be more useful than studying all the correct body language and words to use and all the lists of proper behavior for being culturally congruent with different groups, because none of that addresses the reality of privilege. Learning about the people we work with, of course, can be immensely valuable but, as members of socially over-valued groups, Awareness of our own privilege is key to effectiveness.

Credibility is a high value in Agent-to-Target interactions, and that comes from pulling that bubble in. The Agent group member conveys the non-verbal message, “I know I’m coming in here with all the stink of my privilege, and I will try to keep it close to myself so it doesn’t have as much effect on all of you.” The Target group will tend to respond to that and work more effectively with their Allies. The Target group won’t have to spend as much energy educating the Agent member about privilege, and everyone can focus on the work they came to do.

(White people) are perceived as occupying a center that moves with them wherever they go. For that reason, in part, white artists tend to be far less aware than artists of color of the historical extent to which genes are mixed and shared. For people of color, the implications of mixing are different.

Lucy Lippard (1990, p. 177)

Developing Skills, One Channel at a time

Access to skill sets generally develops independently in each Rank channel. When analyzing situations, we start to notice that having access to wider skill sets in a particular area is no indication that a person will have access to the same skills, or complementary ones, in another Rank channel.

For example, a person who has Target Rank because of gender may have done a lot of Empowerment work from her identity as a woman. She may have spent much of her life in Empowered Target-only space with other women. She may have a strong analysis of the dynamics of sexism and the ways it affects all women, transgender, and intersex people. She may have regular access to Strategy and Re-Centering skills on the gender channel. As she gets older, and passes the age of 65, she becomes a member of the Target group in the area of age. Even though she may have an intellectual understanding of how sexism and ageism are related, and even though she may have been able to predict that she would experience oppression as a member of the elder Target group, she will still have to develop the Target skills one skill at a time. She may use Survival skills as she turns 65, 66, 67, trying to blend in, minimizing the differences, trying to "pass" as a younger person. Although the experience of using higher-level skills as a woman might help her develop access to those skills as an elder, she will still have to develop each skill in turn.

The same applies to development of Allyship skills in members of socially over-valued groups. A person with Agent group membership in ethnicity may have worked hard to develop anti-racism Allyship skills. This person spends a lot of time fighting racism, educating other White people, listening to People of Color, and creating coalitions for equality in the workplace. This ethnicity Agent can have regular and consistent access to Awareness and Allyship skills in this area, and a strong analysis of the insidious effects of racism in society. Yet if the person is a member of the Agent group in the area of Disability, his skills range may be limited to Indifference. If this anti-racist-Agent starts working in an environment with people of disability, he may exhibit Distancing skills toward them. To develop Allyship skills in this new area will take effort, education, exposure, and struggle over time. There is nothing automatic about the development of anti-oppressive skills.

Strong skills as an Agent Ally or Re-Centered Target in one channel do not necessarily mean a complementary set of skills will be available in another area where the person holds Target or Agent group membership. To return to the feminist woman of our earlier example, this woman may work consistently with women who share her national origin Agent Rank – that is, with other women born in the U.S.. She may work skillfully to organize and network with other U.S.-born women. She may be very thoughtful, skilled, and Strategic in organizing women. Yet when confronting the issues faced by immigrants – National Origin Targets – she will use Indifference skills. She

About Guilt:

So, you've said or done something that was particularly, potently, oppressive. If you must feel bad, feel bad about all the times it happened and you didn't notice it at all!

That you're feeling guilty about the incident means you're presently using Awareness skills, which is a good thing. The problem is that the emotions of guilt and shame tend to paralyze rather than motivate us to action. Remember, Allyship = Awareness + Action.

The goal is always to invite the conditions for the next skill to emerge, in ourselves and others.

might even say, "It's not my problem; I'm focused on women's issues." If her work with women brings her into contact with women who immigrated to the U.S., she will likely exhibit Distancing skills. If she decides that she wants to include women immigrants in her feminist organizing, she will need to work through the whole cycle, to learn the lessons of each skill set, and to break beyond the box of convention before she can develop Awareness, or true Allyship, with women who are also immigrants.

Finally, this dynamic means that a person who has developed anti-oppressive skills in one Rank channel as a Target group member cannot be expected to be an effective Ally in an area where they hold Agent group membership. A man might be an effective activist in his Target group membership as a working-class person. He might become an organizer, a voice for labor, someone who effectively supports social class Targets in their struggle for jobs and justice. He could have regular access to Re-Centering skills in social class. In the course of this work, he might have been forced to confront gender oppression, and his own advantage as a man, and he might have developed Allyship skills with women. Yet this man may consistently be using Indifference skills toward sexual orientation Targets. He may say "I don't think there are any gay or lesbian people in my union." If he learns that his own son is gay, his first response may be to exhibit Distancing skills. His strong Target skills in social class, and his hard-won Agent skills in gender, do not mean that he'll be able to exhibit Awareness toward a gay family member. If he wants to expand his skills range as a sexual orientation Agent, he'll have to work through all the skills, with all the struggles, setbacks, and personal pain that accompany this growth.

Why doesn't the experience of being a member of a Target group in one area translate into more sensitivity as a member of an Agent group in another area? One reason is that Target group membership is stressful, and oppression functions as a stress management tool. The more stress in the environment, the more likely we are to use foundational skills, in both our Agent and Target group memberships.

In our Agent group memberships, when we are stressed, we unconsciously use or revert to Distancing and Indifference skills as a mechanism for stress reduction. When we experience pain and suffering as Target group members in one category, we are likely to use the stress management tools in our Agent group areas, using Indifference and Distancing. This is one reason people who are socially de-valued in one group can sometimes act harshly, insensitively, and even be deliberately oppressive as members of socially over-valued groups on other channels. If a man experiences stress as a class Target, he might express his anger as a gender Agent and use Distancing skills toward women. If a woman experiences stress as a gender Target, she might express her frustration when she uses Indifference skills toward a child or elder.

Almost everyone is a member of at least one Target group, everyone has

Going back to normal

Nearing the end of a 15-week graduate course in this material, a student asked in class –

“How long until we go back to normal? How long until I can watch television and have conversations with my friends and not have this overwhelming feeling of guilt, shame, anger and despair all of the moments of my waking and sometimes dreaming life?”

The other students laughed in resonance. My response was as follows:

“It will happen very quickly. So quickly, that by the time the next semester begins when we are in class together, some of you will not be using any of this language or any of these ideas, some will be using them incorrectly, and only a few will be using them correctly. That has been my experience over the past 25 years of teaching this material. If you would like to retain this content, you will not only need to continue to use it on a regular basis, but you will need to make contracts with one another to ensure that you are applying this content correctly and that you are growing and deepening in your understanding and fluency with it, just like with a language.”

Leticia Nieto

experienced ageism as a child, and yet that experience doesn't inform our consciousness as Agent group members in other arenas. The cycle of stress and oppression is self-perpetuating.

We often expect that people who suffer because of being socially devalued in one area will be able to empathize with all socially devalued people, but this is rarely the case. The suffering caused by oppression is a source of stress, and when people are stressed out they will often use narrower skill sets where they can.

The good news is that working with these models and working to develop skills in several channels can help us see how different areas of oppression are related. Once we've learned to access Awareness skills in several different Rank channels, we get familiar with the musculature of Awareness and Allyship, and it may become easier to access wider skills in other areas. Likewise, as we move beyond Empowerment into Strategy and Re-Centering in our Target group memberships, we become familiar with the terrain of those anti-oppression skills. Using Re-Centering, some of the time, we see how similar the dynamics of oppression are, and we can make important connections among the different types of oppression we face. You'll notice this has a very different quality than the attempt an Agent group member using Inclusion may make to universalize suffering. With practice, we find we can shift more easily into the consciousness associated with the wider skill sets.

Developing wider skills in a particular Target or Agent group membership does not guarantee that we will have similar or complementary skills in another Rank area. But practicing the anti-oppressive skills and working to understand the dynamics of oppression in general, we can become practiced in shifting skill sets.

