

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

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

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

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

PART ONE :

# Reading Social Interactions

Often books about oppression, privilege, and diversity present sociological and economic data to support the idea that some people are advantaged at the expense of others. Such information is critical to know and to understand. However, we assume our readers are not in need of proof about the reality of oppression.

Some books explore these dynamics by focusing on a single life, describing an individual's story in the context of whatever mixture of social memberships they hold and the oppression and/or privilege that accompany these memberships. These stories can help us feel the reality of oppression and privilege, share in someone else's pain and anger, and help us develop Empowerment and Awareness skills. Some life stories can show what it's like to live beyond Inclusion, to challenge oppression with grace and energy.

In this book, we use images, metaphors, and brief stories to talk about oppression and privilege in terms that we can understand with our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits. Dr. Nieto developed some of these metaphors and images, while some refer to other sources such as books and movies. Some stories come from friends and colleagues who've generously allowed us to use their experiences.

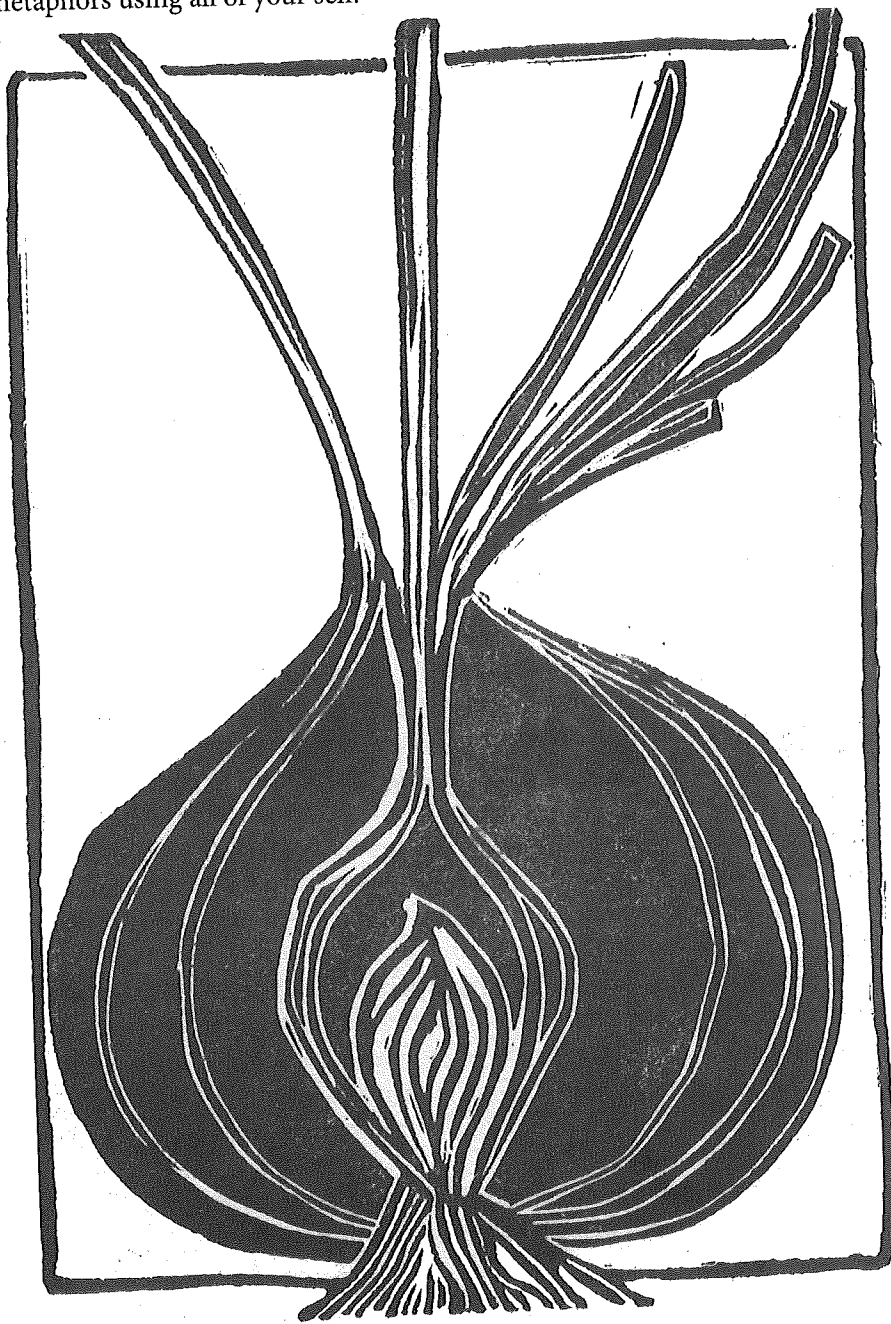
Wouldn't it be great if we could read a book and through its pages come to full consciousness? Have you ever given a book or movie or article to someone else and they didn't read it? Or, they read it, saw it, heard it, but it didn't have the same impact on them as you hoped it would? Oppression is difficult to talk about, to explain, to understand. Language fails us. The models and methods in *Beyond Inclusion*, *Beyond Empowerment* rely on the associative, imaginal, metaphoric mind. Images can be more complete than words alone. They can bypass barriers to understanding through mechanisms like resonance – that sense that something fits or rings true.

You'll notice that this book uses many metaphors to talk about oppression. Oppression is described as a river that flows only one way, yet it's also an ocean that fills every part of the world with its cold, salty water. Oppression feels like a birdcage that holds Target group members inside a small container, but it's also like a suit of clothes that Agent group members wear. Oppression can be like "the Matrix," (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) an inhuman system that sucks life force from people and uses it to destroy the earth, and it can be a theatrical role that requires people to play different parts. Metaphors offer glimpses, sometimes indirect, of what oppression is like. No one metaphor says it all. The choice of metaphors – in a training setting, for example – is a function of timing, the emergence of co-created meanings in the moment, somatic signals given by participants, and many other elements. Hold and use the metaphors gently. You will likely have some favorites and will surely evolve many of your own.

Our human capacities for understanding are enormous. When we use only our literal, sequential, narrowly rational mind, we understand ideas in a

Multiple  
Metaphors  
ahead!

linear, narrow way. Using this mind, we check if things are true or false, real or made-up. We can't help but check concepts against our own lived experience. When we use more of our mind's capacities, we are available to deep feeling, vivid imagination, and insights that encompass much more than true/false. We can even hope to glimpse realities well outside our own lived experience. Metaphor, imagery, and story allow us to access these larger and wider ways of knowing. We invite you to engage with these images and metaphors using all of your self.



## Reading the world like peeling an onion

We are working here with the metaphor of reading, as Paulo Freire (1985) invoked when he invited us to read the world. Picture a set of reading glasses with extraordinary lenses, allowing a person to see at three depths into the social world. Like other metaphors in this book, this three-layer idea is a construct, a set of tools that you can add to the tools you already have. In the beautiful film *Northfork* (Polish & Polish, 2003), the magical character Happy, played by Anthony Edwards, wears a set of glasses with multiple lenses and throughout the film he's constantly flipping them around. If you can, imagine lenses like that.

Picture an onion with three layers. Your glasses have a lens for each layer, which we use to analyze social dynamics. The layers of the onion are, starting from the outside: Status, Rank, and Power. People often use these terms as if they were interchangeable, but here we'll use these terms to denote different things.

Power, the deepest layer, has to do with things like wisdom, source, and will. Rank, the second layer, relates to our social memberships. We all have multiple group memberships; some bring social privileges, some bring social marginalization, and some are neutral. Status, the outer layer, is a question of style, wherein we operate as either "above" or "below." All three of these layers are active all of the time.

This model allows us to make sense of complex interactions, by focusing on just one moment at a time. When we read a slice in time, like a short scene in a movie, a frame of conversation at work, a thought, even a single word – we can observe three levels of dynamics among participants. Understanding a narrow slice won't totally explain collective experience, but deeply seeing what happens within and between individuals in key moments is useful.

### Layers of the onion

The outer, most readily available layer of the onion we call Status. Easy to observe from the outside, Status has to do with style of interaction. Status may be high or low in any given moment, and almost any individual can take a high Status or low Status position at any time. Status is slippery, labile, constantly changing. In the drama of human interactions, we observe Status play – a kind of performance. It can be changed by choice, can be predictable, and is central to our enjoyment of story and humor.

The next layer in, Rank, is more difficult to observe. We can choose whether to take a high or low Status position, whereas Rank categories are socially ascribed (assigned) memberships, not self-chosen. Status will shift often and easily. Rank categories are usually fixed and resistant to change. Status play is two-directional while Rank is one-directional. Agent Rank

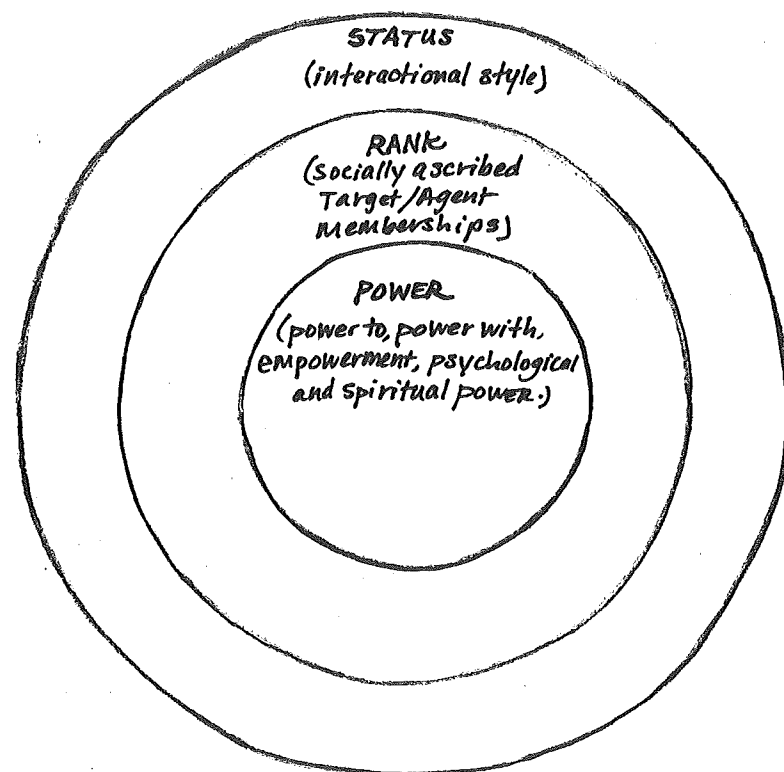
### Puppet Robot Flesh

The Status layer is like strings on a puppet, completely attached and reactive to what other people do. The Rank layer is robotic; our sensations are blunted by hardened surfaces; our perceptions are filtered through well-programmed layers of socialization; someone else has the remote and is in control. With Power we shed the strings, burst out of the robot, and what's left is skin and flesh – authentic and immediate.

brings access and privileges, and Target Rank carries marginalization. With a little bit of attention, Status play becomes obvious. While Rank categories have implications all of the time, in most interactions we tend *not* to be aware of them unless a specific incident brings them to consciousness. Status play is visible and performative, but Rank dynamics are automated and impersonal: Rank will often act through us without our knowing it.

The core of the individual, at the innermost layer of the onion, we call Power. If Status is obvious, and Rank systematic yet unseen, Power is hard to observe directly but undeniable when present. Power encompasses strength, grace, resilience, and equanimity. When we have access to our core, we evidence consciousness of Status and Rank – we have a relationship to them. One way to think about Power is that when we initiate from the Power core, we are most ourselves. We reveal the person we really are, rather than being remotely controlled by Rank roles as if robots, or simply reactive to Status play like puppets on a string.

Using our special glasses, one set of lenses shows you ever-shifting strings in a constant Status dance of complementarity, up/down, high/low. Another, much finer set of lenses reveals people acting out their ascribed Rank roles as members of Target groups and Agent groups. Your most authentic, purest glance perceives Power: divinity in each person, the inevitable “I thou,” a flame inside each person, all part of one fire.



## Power

We use the word power in a specific way, so clarification is in order. The word power often describes power-over or control. Power-over is real, and it is important to observe and discuss the workings of force in the world. Here, we want to distinguish power-over, which usually arises from fear, inadequacy, or greed, from the core of Power in the center of each human being. We are reclaiming the word Power to arouse in the mind an image of being tapped in, being connected to something larger than our selves, being hooked up to a transcendent source. This kind of Power manifests in inner Power, Power-to, Power-with, and Empowerment.

Our assumption is that when we come from our center, when we are Powerful, we are our truest selves. We move in the world connected to peace, centeredness, strength, awe. When we have access to the core of Power, the world and how we see people changes. We feel hope.

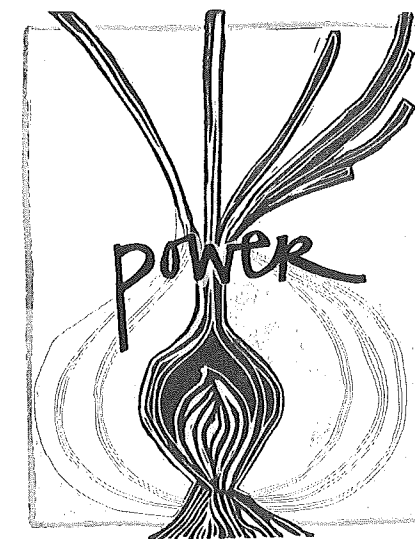
Why is it important to start here?

The work of challenging oppression, facing the suffering that oppression brings to the world, knowing the ways we ourselves participate in systems of oppression, can be heartbreaking. It can bring us to our knees. It hurts. Among people who work to bring about change in the world, we often hear the phrase – “I won’t see it in my lifetime.” We feel grief, loss, discouragement, and sometimes helplessness. However, the very drive to change the world for the better is an expression of Power. Through the resources in our deepest core, we find strength and groundedness. Surprisingly and randomly we find ourselves handling the toxic stuff of oppression and the fragile stuff of liberation. There is mystery here. A saying attributed to Margaret Mead (2010) tells us: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” The committed individuals she describes are persons with practiced access to their Power core.

Our discussion of the Power core so far has hinted at what some call spiritual Power.

Another facet of Power is psychological Power. The psychologically Powerful person puts their suffering to work. When bad things happen, the psychologically Powerful person makes the most out of it. Pain is a teacher. Heartbreak enlarges us. It can increase our potential for healing rather than leaving us ruined. We are made resilient by suffering.

Psychological Power is evidenced in the capacity to see many sides of a story. It surfaces in compassion for the person who annoys us. It sends our hand up to say yes to great challenges in spite of risk and suffering. Psychological Power is marked by a sense of wholeness and coherence, even in times of great pain. When you find your sense of *you* even in the midst of sorrow, you are exercising psychological Power.



**Exercise: Person of Power Visualization**

To get a sense of what Power is, think of someone you know, or remember, or have read about, or can imagine – a person who meets all these criteria:

- They have equanimity, wisdom, clarity, ruthlessness
- They exhibit relentless love
- They have unfathomable compassion
- They can hold not just two sides of an issue, but many sides
- They use the idea of seven generations – thinking of seven generations ahead, seven generations back, seven layers of significant differences to the side, seven levels of evolution above themselves, and seven levels of evolution below themselves
- When they walk into the room everyone's best self can come forward
- When you talk to them you experience being totally accepted

This person brings forth in you a strong desire to be the best that you can be. Around them you feel simultaneously exposed (as if they can see through you) and forgiven or blessed. At times it seems this person's sheer presence contributes to the resolution of conflicts and contributes to the emergence of a harmonious environment. They have a different sense of humor that involves laughing *with* instead of laughing *at*. You might feel loved by this person, or feel love around this person. You might feel admiration, respect, and a deep sense of generosity of spirit.

Once you've formed this picture in your mind, imagine that this person is behind you, as if watching over you. Feel this person extending blessing to you in your endeavors, backing you up in your work. Notice how you feel being in the presence of that person. What is it like having them on your side, in your corner, backing you up? You may sense an opening of your heart center and a sense of connectedness.

As you read, from this point forward, when you see the word Power, let it remind you of this feeling. You can invoke this person of Power to back you up whenever you want to, simply by saying their name or envisioning them in your mind.

**Your sense of the Source**

Take your attention inward. Think about your personal experience of that something that is larger than the self – something transcendent, broader, and deeper. For you it may feel like oneness with all beings; it may feel like the enduring natural world; it may feel like deity, goddess, god; it may feel like spirit; it may feel like consciousness itself.

What feelings do you have as you hold this image in your mind? Does your feeling include peace, centeredness, strength, balance, comfort, awe, grace? Speak aloud the words of the feelings you notice. Bringing your attention back to your surroundings, what do you notice about the room once those words are spoken? What feels like it has changed?

In a group doing this exercise, people report feeling calmer. They say their senses feel sharper.

I am: Power  
 I am power  
 I am wind sifting the tree's leaves  
 I am black clouds, rainmaker  
 I am histories hidden  
 Slave ships riding on ebony waves  
 I am what I say I am  
 I am heart and soul  
 Gospel and hollers floating on warm southern breath  
 I am sky swallowing the big white moon  
 I am strength  
 I am witness  
 I am the door from which no one returns  
 I am a little brown girl with nappy hair, freckles, green eyes  
 I am light skinned, black  
 And still I rise  
 I am beauty  
 I am sorrow  
 I am power

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**FREQUENTLY  
ASKED  
QUESTION**
**The concept of Power sounds religious. What if I am not religious?**

Religious frameworks do offer the suggestion of something transcendent and larger than ourselves, but so do other frameworks such as valuing nature, recognizing the strength of collectives or community, meaning-making through generations, or love, interpersonal or otherwise.

For some people their first impulse will be to access a religious framework or symbology to anchor the idea of Power. We encourage that, and we equally encourage any discipline or ideology that offers transcendence and/or source-ness.

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**FAQ**

Psychological Power is related to the concept of ego strength. In our lifetime, we spend our first thirty or forty years developing our sense of self, sometimes called ego. Once we have crafted a strong sense of self, we may hear an invitation to the further work of transcending the ego. The inner tasks of mid-life shift us beyond our personal ego toward wider service, higher purpose, and deeper understanding of ourselves and others.

Human development is one of the root disciplines informing *Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment*. The human story can be stated in three frames: pre-personal/pre-egoic (before we have a sturdy sense of self), personal/egoic (what we think of as adult consciousness), and transpersonal/post-egoic (the optional move beyond our self). We'll say more about this later. For now, we suggest true anti-oppression work is inherently transpersonal.

The psychologically Powerful person is resilient, not brittle. They are not easily thrown by life experiences. Imagine a person with psychological Power, someone with maturity and equanimity, whose open-heartedness stems from having entered their life experience fully. Now, think about this picture. How is it different from the image you form of a person with spiritual Power? Can you envision a person who demonstrates access to both psychological and spiritual Power? Notice that suffering can deepen access to the Power core – feeling pain doesn't necessarily interrupt our connection to source, and can even make it stronger.

Consider the idea of Power through the words of Toni Morrison, who writes:

*"...You had this canny ability to shape an untenable reality, mold it, sing it, reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence, which is a knowing so deep it's like a secret. In your silence, enforced or chosen, lay not only eloquence but discourse so devastating that "civilization" could not risk engaging in it lest it lose the ground it stomped...When you say 'No' or 'Yes' or 'This and not that,' change itself changes. So the literature you live and write asks and gives no quarter. When you sculpt or paint, organize or refute, manage, teach, nourish, investigate or love, you do not blink. Your gaze, so lovingly unforgiving, stills agitates and stills again. Wild or serene, vulnerable or steel trap, you are the touchstone by which all that is human can be measured. Porch or horizon, your sweep is grand...You made me laugh so hard the sound of it disappeared – returned, I guess, to its beginning when laughter and tears were sisters too" (Morrison, 1996, p.123).*

Collectively, these images can embody for you what we mean when we talk about Power. Please evoke them when you need calm, willingness, or regeneration. Power is at the core of the onion, and it's at the core of each one of us. From here we move to talk about Status, which is the outside of the onion, the exterior surface of interactions.

## Status

From Power, the deepest layer of the onion, we shift our focus to Status, the outer layer. Status play is the most perceptible and obvious aspect of interactions between people. It is subject to quick changes during interactions. Status moves are discrete in time: they have a precise beginning and end. Once you learn about Status play, it becomes quite easy (and fun) to track.

In any interaction, people take high Status and low Status positions. Both high Status and low Status positions can be effective, appropriate, and comfortable, depending on the individuals and the situation. We call this layer of interaction "Status play" to reflect its malleability and flexibility, although in many situations Status play is a serious matter.

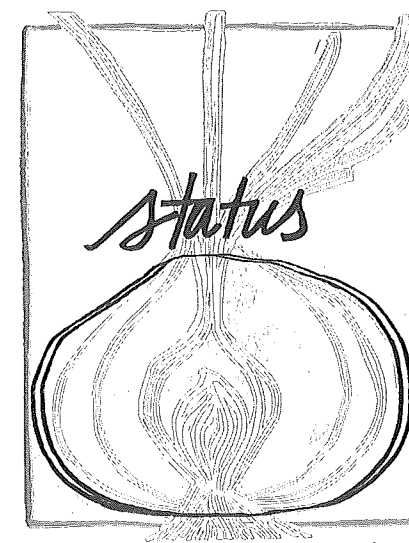
Almost anyone can take a high Status or low Status position in a given moment, regardless of Rank or group memberships, and regardless of their access to the Power core. Even in situations of gross inequity such as master-slave, parent-child, or CEO-wage worker, the person in the subordinate position can make a high Status move within a given interaction. Taking high or low Status positions does not change the underlying Rank memberships that each person holds.

Status is associated with the features and characteristics about ourselves that we are aware of or identify with. When we speak about ourselves and identify the "kind of person" we believe ourselves to be, we are usually talking about the Status layer of social interaction.

Because Status sits on the surface, we tune it in when examining social realities, often failing to notice underlying issues of Rank. Most ordinary social discourse is focused on the Status layer, and most news and entertainment are primarily "about" Status play. For example, events are covered mainly in terms of who wins and who loses, who is in and who is out, who is up and who is down, who behaves well, who behaves badly, who breaks the law, who abides by the law. Absent is a deeper analysis of access, equity, and history. Consider political, entertainment, or crime-related news. Have you heard the phrase "level playing field" used to suggest there is no longer injustice? If that were true, if the playing field were level, then behaviors could be judged narrowly in Status terms. If we pay attention only to Status, giving everyone an equal opportunity to succeed looks like a simple task.

Status play is the basis of much humor. A dignified man in a business suit slips on a banana peel. An undistinguished person is accidentally put in a position of great authority. A person with an important job confesses to an unfortunate choice. All these situations make us laugh by upending Status expectations.

Status play keeps us riveted to unfolding dramas. Important people are humbled, obscure people are elevated, clever characters trump each other in a high-stakes game of witty rejoinders. Whether our television watching tastes



Equality: everyone is the same and the same rules apply. Equity: consider the conditions in history.

Julia Maxwell

run to *The West Wing* (Sorkin, 1999) or *Survivor* (Parsons, 2000), the same seductive sequence of one-up and one-down moments satisfy a fundamental interest that evolution has built into our nervous systems.

Status play is a basic human activity, one we share with many other animals and can observe in the interactions of even the simplest one-celled creatures. One way to think about Status is as a kind of posturing. Organisms can be thought of as generally relating through being above or below – a little above or a lot above, a little below or a lot below. We can extend the metaphor of Status to see how it fits in those biological contexts too.

Any interaction between people, and many between people and animals, can be analyzed in terms of high Status and low Status. Human beings engage in Status play with their companion and domestic animals and among themselves. Dogs wrestle, force each other to the ground, submit and roll over; ducks peck each other, or flee to the far shore; children shove each other and brag, “I have more Barbies® than you!” while others follow the leader and obey commands. Five minutes later, a new interaction starts, and the Status play can change.

For human beings, the meaning of Status play varies with the group setting. High Status play does not necessarily indicate hostility, nor does low Status play always reflect coalition or warmth. High Status play among those who are bonded and share strong group affiliations has a very different meaning than among people who are not connected or bonded. Within a well-bonded group, even heavy Status play such as mutual teasing or personal insults can be affectionate and used to deepen group loyalty. When soccer players on the field slap each other in play, or sisters repeat well-worn routines and rejoinders, the result can be increased connection and trust.

Status style is a preference, influenced by personality, family history, regional and cultural factors, and the role a person plays within the group. Nobody plays high Status or low Status every minute. Certain professional roles come with strong expectations of a particular type of Status play – doctors, for example, are notorious for playing high Status, and wait persons are expected to play low Status. But a doctor who plays high Status at work might prefer low Status with her family, and a waiter who is deferential to diners may be autocratic among his friends.

Either high or low Status behavior can be appropriate, and work well for the people involved. We don't place any particular moral or ethical weight on either low or high Status play. That is, low Status positions are not inherently preferable to high Status ones. Interactions work best when we are conscious of Status dynamics and are willing to take either high or low Status positions, attending to the needs of the moment and allowing other people to have their preference. A room full of people playing high Status can be energetic and fun, or full of conflict. A room full of people playing low Status might feel like a comforting, supportive environment, it might be terribly boring, or it might signal caution. Fortunately, we can often adjust the energy in interactions in a

positive way with our own Status moves.

It is helpful to think of Status in terms of individual and group preferences. For example, regions in the United States seem to have distinct Status styles. In the Pacific Northwest, where we live, low Status styles dominate. These are associated with civility and politeness. This style is often described as “polite but not warm,” and people from regions with a preference for high Status play may find the Northwest chilly and lacking in intimacy. The high Status style of New Yorkers, in contrast, is usually louder, more active, both friendlier and more confrontational. A Seattleite visiting New York might have trouble recognizing whether a conversation is threatening or merely louder than they are used to, and may feel angry or afraid in situations that are not really dangerous.

Ethnicity can also play a part in our Status style, which can lead to misunderstandings. A high degree of expressiveness and high Status play – reflecting closeness, intimacy, and strong family bonds – is considered characteristic of many Italian Americans and part of the stereotype of Italian American behavior. A more reserved, less expressive, low Status style is often associated with Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon ethnic backgrounds. The humor in Garrison Keillor's stories of Lake Wobegon, on the *Prairie Home Companion* radio show (1974), often turns on the characters' marked preference for low Status behavior. Characters in these stories go to great length to avoid calling attention to or expressing pride in themselves.

Work cultures have widely varying expectations about Status play, and job roles often come with well-defined Status play expectations. Rigid and bureaucratic environments that feel extremely staid are characterized by minimal Status play – only small gestures of high or low Status are expected or acceptable. Many offices have this deadening quality, which is one reason they can be so unpleasant for the people who work there. More playful and open environments evoke a larger range of Status play, with more extremes of both high Status and low Status behavior. This is an example of how Status play can become performative and contribute to our enjoyment of the work environment. Creative, artistic, and even political settings, from restaurant kitchens to theaters and campaign headquarters, can be fun to work in, even when the work is demanding and badly paid. Active Status play can be engaging to the body and mind and make the difference between an exhausting day of work and an exhilarating one.

High and low Status play manifest with characteristic gestures and postures. High Status play is associated with an upright posture, raised head, lifted chest, shoulders back, and “looking down your nose” at someone else. Moving and talking quickly and taking up significant personal space can also be non-verbal high Status moves.

Low Status play often appears with a slumped posture, lowered or tilted head, collapsed or lowered chest, sagging or hunched shoulders, and looking

**Status play:**

has gradations.  
has modulations.  
can go both ways.  
can flip back and forth.  
is intermittent.

**Rank dynamics:**

have no gradations.  
are not modulated.  
are binary and  
uni-directional.  
are constant.

up at the other person. Taking up little space can be another low Status move, as can moving gingerly or stepping backwards.

Merely adopting the body posture associated with each Status position will trigger specific emotional states and may evoke memories of past experiences of Status play. Status postures may be quite subtle, or exaggerated.

We are all Status players: almost anyone can play high Status or low Status. These positions are changeable, ever shifting, and can be interpreted only within the moment of a given interaction. A person who is well regarded and has a highly visible public profile can use low Status behavior. When used skillfully, such a move can be disconcerting, charming, or persuasive. A person who is socially devalued, including one with Target roles, can assert herself or himself in forceful, high Status ways. For instance, a three-year old who stands up and yells "I hate you!" to their mother is displaying high Status behavior. The adult, who has much more influence than the child, will still feel the emotional impact.

Different social or organizational functions evoke different Status styles. The president of an institution is generally expected to display high Status behavior in public settings. The janitor is expected to display low Status behavior. Status play that is incongruent with one's role may be used selectively and effectively, or it can be perceived as inappropriate and even shocking. Different situations call out different kinds of Status play: someone who refuses to deviate from their preferred style under all circumstances would encounter a variety of interpersonal problems. Flexibility in Status play is an important social skill.

When people first learn about Status play they often assume that high Status implies greater influence and low Status implies subjugation, but this is not always so. Depending on the situation, high Status behavior can be ineffectual, coming across as mere bullying and arrogance, especially when others are not willing to take the complementary low Status positions. Playing high Status in occupational settings that anticipate low Status behavior can be self-defeating. For example, the restaurant server won't benefit from arguing with or insulting the customers.

Low Status behavior can be highly effective as a means of influencing others. A low Status style can be persuasive, friendly, and supportive, an effective way to build connections. People in helping professions often use a low Status style to offer suggestions and information while allowing the client, student, or patient to experience control in the situation.

Status can change, quite literally, in the blinking of an eye. When observing Status play, notice the moment-to-moment shifts in Status. Partners, close friends, and family members may become especially flexible in shifting Status positions rapidly and continually and to extremes. This flexibility can be a sign of intimacy and comfort.

**Status Loss: A Moment in Time**

The momentary experience of Status loss can be painful and upsetting, but it doesn't necessarily have any long-term consequences. If we're used to playing high Status and being respected, the momentary experience of being criticized in public, threatened, or losing an argument can make an emotional impact on us. We have found that it is important to differentiate between experiences of Status loss and incidents of oppression. (We'll discuss oppression and incidents of oppression later when we look at social Rank.)

The key to recognizing a situation of Status loss – as opposed to oppression – is that Status loss is discrete in time. The situation has a beginning and an end. We have all had experiences where we have been treated badly, times where we've been excluded, discriminated against, even ostracized. Most of us have experienced acts of subtle or not so subtle violence – verbal, physical, or otherwise. In fact, one of the difficulties in teaching and learning about oppression and social Rank is that when the topic of oppression arises we all tend to refer to our file of negative experiences. Not all of the incidents in our file are examples of oppression. Some are examples of Status loss only.

One difference between incidents of oppression and experiences of Status loss is that experiences of Status loss stand out in contrast to the patterns in our daily lives, while incidents of oppression are distinct, yet in line with patterns of social devaluing and marginalization. It makes logical sense that we would tend to remember most clearly those experiences that are both negative and in sharp contrast to our every day expectations. We remember Status losses as significant moments in our lives, but these experiences differ from the ongoing nature of oppression. Paradoxically, as we've just said, the fact that a Status loss experience is unusual can highlight the importance we place on it. Individuals often point to experiences of Status loss as examples of how "everyone's oppressed" – which is not true. In fact, oppression advantages some and marginalizes some. Status loss is more universal. Those of us who experience privilege throughout our lives may, and often do, mistake the experience of Status loss for oppression.

**FREQUENTLY  
ASKED  
QUESTION****How can violence ever not be oppressive?**

Violence is hostile, dangerous, irresponsible, cruel, dehumanizing, abusive, and almost always non-productive, but we reserve the term *oppressive* for instances that reinforce the supremacist norm: the systematic, institutionalized overvaluing of Agent groups.

In no way do we condone violence or promote the use of violence against Agent group members as a mechanism of anti-oppression.

**FAQ**

**Exercise: Status Awareness Practices**

In any setting where people interact, practice observing high Status and low Status moves. Notice body posture, eye contact (or lack thereof), breathing patterns, and gestures, as well as verbal statements. Note moment-to-moment changes as well as repeated moves that suggest a player's social position. Meetings and family gatherings are prime spots for this practice.

**Exercise: High Status Play**

Imagine two people talking. They have each been instructed to use actions and comments declaring that each is better than the other. Each displays high Status behavior, taking every opportunity to enhance her or his own Status and put down the other person.

"Well I'm late, because I had some trouble parking my new Lexus in the lot."

"Yeah, I was late too. My new job is so demanding; I never realized how much the director is responsible for."

"So you're the interim director, until they hire the real one, right?"

"I am the director of operations. If you're still looking for a job, I might offer to help."

"My consulting business is really booming, I don't need to take a 9-5 job with a questionable company like that."

Status play can be observable across a room even if you don't hear the words being exchanged.

Status moves are discrete in time:

They have a precise beginning & end.

Both high Status & low Status positions can be effective, appropriate, and comfortable, depending on the individuals and the situation.

**Exercise: Low Status Play**

Imagine two people talking. They have each been instructed to use actions and comments that declare each is lesser than the other. Each displays low Status behavior, taking every opportunity to lower his or her own Status and enhance the Status of the other person. Comments about one's own incompetence or unworthiness, and the superior attributes of the other player, get things rolling.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came today. Sorry the office is such a mess. I'm just terribly disorganized."

"Thank you for seeing me. I know you have a lot to do, and I shouldn't even ask you for your time, I just didn't know who else to call."

"No, I don't have anything important to do. I'm just in this office until they lay me off, probably next week. What do you need?"

"Well, you know if I'm lucky I'll be able to graduate in June . . ."

"Yes, that's great! You did so well in school, you'll be able to get a really great job. I bet you have lots of offers."

". . . naw, I don't have any job prospects. Are you maybe hiring here at human services? Otherwise, I'll have to go back to Cleveland and live with my mother."

"Oh, you don't want to work here, this place is falling apart. I'm surprised we haven't lost our lease..."

Status play can be observable across a room even if you don't hear the words being exchanged.

### The Allegory of the Hum

To help illustrate "isms" and the consistency of their function, Dr Nieto asks us to consider the steady hum of an air conditioner. At first, the sound is noticeable and possibly distracting. With time, one becomes desensitized and oblivious to it, but the sound remains nonetheless. In fact, if the air conditioner were to stop making noise, it might warrant the attention of everyone in the space and become a distraction. Racism, sexism, ageism, etc., work much like that subtle hum in the background. Although their influence is perpetual, it remains outside the awareness of those privileged enough to ignore it.

Jens K. Lund

## Status and Violence

High Status play includes a wide spectrum of behavior from positive leadership to aggression. It can be loving, helpful, and delightful, yet the range of high Status behaviors also includes hurtful actions. Directly hurtful or aggressive behavior is always a high Status move. Such aggressive behavior can range from a subtle non-verbal dismissal, to insults and assaults, all the way to murder.

Physical violence is always a high Status move, no matter who makes it. This remains true even if that person holds a social position that is considered subordinate. Violence is high Status even when the aggressor has experienced oppression at the hands of the person toward whom the violence is directed. An abused wife who murders her husband, an enslaved person who kills the master, or a homeless person who attacks a wealthy one are using high Status. Murder, assault, and terrorism are extreme examples of high Status behavior. Such actions might be taken by anyone, regardless of Rank social memberships.

As horrifying as violence is, it doesn't always constitute oppression. Some instances of violence are instances of oppression, while others are instances of extreme high Status behavior. We don't see violence as an appropriate response to oppression, but we want to distinguish between Status behavior, including violence, and *oppression* – which is systemic. Using the lens of Status to analyze aggression and violence, we will see that the use of violence does not itself change the nature of oppression and privilege.

One way to visualize oppression is as a "river" that flows in only one direction, reliably benefiting members of Agent groups and consistently marginalizing members of Target groups – and this is still true when a person with Target Rank attacks a person with Agent Rank. The use of high Status moves by people carrying Target Rank is sometimes mistaken for "reverse oppression." In areas where we carry Agent Rank, we are all vulnerable to this misperception, because we tend to react most to events that happened to us – especially when they were in contrast to our usual experience. While there is such a thing as reverse discrimination, in that anyone can discriminate against anyone else – even a member of a Target group against a member of an Agent group – we don't believe there is such a thing as reverse oppression. Status moves do not change the direction in which the river of oppression flows, regardless of who the perpetrator and the victim are. If this seems an unusual idea, it will become clearer later on in this book.

We have subtitled this book "a developmental strategy to liberate everyone." As you continue to read, we invite you to adopt a kind of beginner's mind. The work of anti-oppression, social change, and social justice requires that we shift our perspective and worldview. One of these shifts will be to add weight to ideas that may feel new to you – ideas for which you might not have your own "bank" of direct, lived experiences to refer to.

