

Some Assumptions About *Power and Rank* in Community Art

By Wendy Morris

- **A willingness to investigate the dynamics of power is a pre-requisite for effective community work.**

In American society, *power* is often defined as the ability to directly exert influence on things or people. *Power* can be defined as a means or as an outcome. When I was working in the *Reflective Leadership* program at the Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, *power* was defined as “the ability to get things done”.

- **Rank is the sum total of a person’s privileges. Consciousness of *rank* is a helpful tool for distinguishing the use of power from the abuse of power.**

Arnold Mindell, a psychotherapist and conflict resolution facilitator, defines *rank* as “the social or personal power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power.” *Rank* implies a ranking of an individual’s social or personal power; it is the sum of a person’s privileges. *Rank* can be inherited or earned. Some forms of *rank*, such as white skin privilege or owning class background, can only be inherited; other forms of *rank*, such as psychological or spiritual *rank* may be inherited or earned.

- **Given historical patterns of power and abuse, a useful question might be: “If I have *rank*, how can I use it well?” rather than “How can I get rid of my *rank*?”**

Many of us have a personal and/or cultural history of being abused by power, so we have a tendency to want to throw it away. I’ve been in many rooms where guilty white people were futilely trying to figure out how to “get rid” of our unearned white skin privilege. In *A Burst of Light* Audre Lorde wrote, “To acknowledge privilege is the first step towards making it available for wider use.”

- **The dynamics of power in community work are complex. The concepts of *social rank*, *psychological rank*, and *spiritual rank* can give language to some of the subtler dynamics.**

Social rank is the status which is accorded to a person because of her or his position; skin color; ethnicity; class (rich/poor); sexual orientation (gay/

straight/ bisexual); gender (woman/ man/ transgender); religion; ability/disability; health (ill/ healthy); age; (too old/ too young); education; expertise; profession...

Psychological rank is the power a person has due to his or her interpersonal comfort. It implies a comfort with oneself and an ability to understand others. People who are considered emotionally balanced have more *rank* than those who are perceived as emotionally unstable. For example, someone who lives with schizophrenia has less *rank* than someone who helps people with schizophrenia. A happy childhood is a form of *psychological rank*, because of the feeling of security in adulthood that results from being well-cared for as a child. A person who grows up under insecure conditions can also develop *psychological rank* as a survival skill because the ability to assess oneself and/or others provides relief from the anxiety of unpredictable relationships. People who work well across cultures often have *psychological rank*. Examples might be bell hooks, R.D. Laing, Julian Bond, Winona LaDuke, Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, Paul Wellstone and Liz Lerman.

Spiritual rank is the power a person has due to her or his ability to connect with “the vast mystery”. The greater one’s ability to be present and non-attached during a crisis, the more *rank* one has. *Spiritual Rank* can also manifest as compassion, love and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all creation. Examples of artists, organizers and leaders with high *spiritual rank* might be: Paul Robeson, Victor Hara, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Nelson Mandela, Rigoberta Menchu Tum, the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi and Aung Sang Su Kyi.

- **It is possible to have *psychological rank* or *spiritual rank* without *social rank*.**

For example, Joan of Arc had low *social rank* (she was a fourteen year old “peasant girl” who heard voices), but her *spiritual rank* transcended her *social rank*. Many of the most powerful and effective community-based artists and organizers I know are also individuals with low *social rank*. Their deep *spiritual rank* and/or *psychological rank* enables them to have an impact (at least some of the time) despite the oppressive limitations that are imposed on them due to racism, classism or homophobia.

- **No matter how much *psychological rank* or *spiritual rank* an individual has, the systemic oppression which underlies *social rank* is a constant, relentless and pervasive force to deal with.**

The higher a person’s *social rank*, the more difficult it can be to perceive the systemic nature of social oppression. Justin Podur writes about racism as a social caste system with two main effects: to constrain people’s lives by sorting them into a hierarchy of rank; and to maintain, extend and reproduce this hierarchy. Five components that sustain this social caste system are: 1. the economic system, 2. geographic separation of races (if space is shared,

ensuring the space is controlled by whites), 3. the state (limited access to the political process, inequities throughout the legal and educational systems,,), 4. culture (cultural institutions which shape how people think about themselves and society), and 5. kinship (race is maintained as a social fact by the social separation of races). (From *Institutional Racism Instructional*)

- **Rank can be conscious or unconscious; people are more likely to be conscious of the areas in our lives where we have LESS rank than the areas where we have MORE rank.**

For example, it is much easier for me to notice my lack of privilege as a woman than it is for me to notice the privileges given to me because I have white skin, a heterosexual marriage, a master's degree, a middle class background, accent-free English and good physical health. I may also be unaware of the power I have due to my *psychological rank* and/or my *spiritual rank*.

- **Unconscious rank is the breeding ground for the abuse of power.**

We all have different kinds of *rank* and privilege, which give us power. Becoming aware of *rank* allows us to use the *rank* we do have to benefit others, as well as ourselves. When we are unaware of rank, we are less able to see the implications of our actions, setting the stage for abuse and our own destruction. For example, Bill Clinton was a man with enormous *social rank* as well as *psychological rank* (as demonstrated by his ability to work with a diverse range of people). When he engaged in a sexual relationship with an aide, he treated her as an equal, which she was not. By disregarding the truth of his own *rank*, Clinton led to his own downfall.

- **Rank is a resource. Like any other resource, rank can be used to benefit others or to oppress others.**

Individuals with *spiritual rank* or *psychological rank* are not necessarily "good". They can oppress, marginalize and shut others up as readily as someone with unconscious high *social rank*. Many of us get our way by throwing our psychological or spiritual weight around. Examples might be a social worker who tells his client she is "just projecting" her feelings; or a community leader who "rises above" the conflicts of her community and stays uninvolved, aloof and unreachable.

How can we harness the resource of *rank* where it is being used well and hold people accountable (ourselves included) for where rank is being used irresponsibly?

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