



## Summary: *Understanding Oppression*

Below you will find a summary of the *Understanding Oppression* article (by Leticia Nieto and Margot F. Boyer, from ColorsNW Magazine, Oct. 2006) from our pre-work, as well as a guide to the *A Development Strategy for Liberation* handout.

Bear in mind that the skills described here apply only to the members of Target groups within those specific Target memberships.

### What is a Target Group?

- Target groups (children and elders; people with disabilities; Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians; people of color, gay/lesbian and bisexual people; and so on).
- In our Target memberships, we learn skills that help us fit in with Agent expectations for our group.

### The Skill Sets

#### Survival:

Survival skills enable us to stay alive and in relative safety by conforming to Agent expectations.

- There are **two ways to express Survival skills**:
  1. **Approximate to Agent** – to move, think and talk like a person who has Agent membership. We unconsciously attempt to meet the goal of this skill set, which is to make members of the Agent group comfortable and to meet demands based on the Agent group's definition of what is normal or okay.
  2. The second Survival skill is to **fit the stereotype** that the Agent group has of our Target group: to move, think and talk in conformity with Agent expectations for our group.

#### Confusion:

Confusion skills **arise when we notice how exhausting** it is to use Survival skills, and begin to realize that something is amiss.

- We notice that some people are valued differently than we are, that we are encountering oppression.
- Using our Confusion skills, we may contradict ourselves and doubt the evidence of our senses. We say things like, "That doesn't seem fair, but there must be a good explanation."
- As long as our skill repertoire is limited to only Survival and Confusion skills, we remain subject to internalized and horizontal oppression.



### **Empowerment:**

Empowerment, **takes an enormous amount of energy** from within and without.

- To make this big move we must have access to Empowered Target-only space, a place where people who share a common Target membership get together to talk about what we face, how it feels and what do to about it.
- In Empowered Target-only space, Targets listen and talk about our common experience, what happens to us every day, and often we see others nodding in recognition even before we finish the story.
  - We need to talk about our experience of oppression, especially the subtle but constant marginalizations.
    - It's painful, but it keeps us awake,
    - When we speak about the oppression we wake up more and more, which can help us avoid sliding back into the unconsciousness of the earlier skills.
- We seek out information; history of oppression we face,
- Express solidarity with other members of our group.
- We express anger at Agent norms, Agent institutions and individual Agent members.
- The energy of Empowerment helps us
  - mobilize to resist oppression,
  - take action,
  - learn everything there is to learn about the nature of supremacy and how to counter injustice.
- Constant focus on the dynamics of oppression is often exhausting; we can't sustain the energetic demand of constantly confronting oppression head-on.

### **Strategy:**

We begin to **evaluate what works and what doesn't**, and to make more conscious choices about when to bring up the issue, when to walk away, when to concentrate on other matters.

- We start to choose our battles and sort out the most effective action;
  - when to work with other Targets,
  - when to make demands of social institutions,
  - when to confront individual Agents,
  - when not to act.
- We align ourselves with the best values and norms of our own Target group and spend less time reacting to the Agent group and Agent expectations.
- Strategy skills free us to make choices that support our group and ourselves.
- Strategy skills conserve our energy and maximize our effectiveness in anti-oppression work.



### **Re-Centering:**

As we continue to use Strategy skills, **we begin more and more to discern our own optimal, liberating norms and values from oppressive, dehumanizing ones**, and to support members of our own and other Target groups. We acknowledge the significance and impact of inequity due to Rank memberships and make increasingly congruent and adaptive choices. We find more ready access to our true Power, and are able to bring it to bear on our daily lives. We call these the **Re-Centering skills**.

- We collaborate with other Targets and with ally Agents to challenge system of oppression in the most effective, humanizing and streamlined ways.
- We use our understanding of systems of oppression to move into leadership roles in our social-change work.
- The goal is not to always use a certain skill set, but rather to use the skills that are most functional in a given moment.

