

## 2014 ACTO Conference Pre-Work

Hello!

If you are receiving this, you have registered to attend the ACTO Conference at the end of April. Since the Conference theme, **Experiment, Expand & Play!**, encourages us to color outside the lines, we—the team co-presenting the inaugural session, *How We Help, How We Harm: Deepening our Understanding of Culture, Power, Privilege & Rank*—are similarly inviting you to take some time ahead of the conference to warm up this important conversation and participate in a reflection exercise as pre-work. (We are coaches and coach trainers after all!) We thank you in advance for your commitment to ACTO and to exploring these critical issues in coach education.

In service of our community's edginess, excellence and innovation,  
 ~ *Kim Fowler, Johnny Manzon-Santos, Jonelle Naude, Marilyn O'Hearne & Michael Scott*  
 Representatives of ACTO's Task Force on Cultural Awareness, Power & Privilege

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## Preamble

We offer below some brief context for the exercise that follows. It's not meant to comprehensively explain a host of complex issues, but rather to share our perspective and our framing for how we'll be approaching the session in Orlando, which is grounded in part in Amy and Arnold Mindell's Process Work and their analysis on power, privilege and rank. We also acknowledge that people are coming with different levels of exposure to and experience with these topics. This diversity will serve to deepen our collective learning as conference participants and ACTO stakeholders. We count on your individual wisdom and expertise to help us take this conversation to a place where we see and communicate with each other with greater awareness, clarity, honesty and compassion.

### Working Assumptions

Individuals can experience power, privilege and rank as a result of the status they have earned through their own endeavors in life such as professional or academic achievement. These markers of status may be relatively obvious and more easily anticipated and worked with. However, rank, power and privilege that come from the social groups that one identifies with or belongs to, can be more subtle and difficult to name and engage. These forms of social power, privilege and rank are not earned; they are something people are borne into. And it is the latter that we are focusing on here.

Every social group has its own set of norms, standards, beliefs and values, all of which help to comprise its unique culture. Members of each group have a deep unconscious understanding of how to behave and fit in. They know which behaviours are valued and which are not. They know the rules of engagement.

Members of a dominant social group are afforded power, privilege and rank and typically experience a general sense of comfort since they are in settings that align with their norms,

standards, beliefs and values. The ease they feel contributes to an inner confidence and a belief that everyone thinks and feels like them. They can carry a subtle sense of entitlement to speak and do as they please.

On the other hand, people who are not members of a particular dominant group often feel marginalised. They do not feel they belong nor experience the same inner confidence. Their behaviour is tentative and they may not speak up when they are in disagreement. Members of dominant social groups tend to speak with authority as if their worldviews are 'the truth'.

When individuals behave with little awareness of the power, privilege and rank associated with their social groups, their attitudes and behaviours may demean, dismiss or ignore others. This harm is sometimes referred to as causing micro-aggressions. In a coaching or coach training context, the effect on communication between a coach/coach educator from a dominant group and a coachee/student from a marginalised group could be distorted by these power, privilege and rank differences. In fact, the effect on the process of educating or coaching is likely to be harmful rather than helpful if the coach/coach educator is unaware of the power, privilege and rank afforded them by their membership in various dominant social groups. It is the cultural experience of belonging to dominant social groups and the cultural experience of belonging to marginalised social groups that we wish to lift up here and during our session.

To further illustrate, consider these examples of social groups that tend to be dominant and marginalised (in no order of importance):

<b>Dominant Social Groups</b>	<b>Marginalised Social Groups</b>
Native Users of Spoken English	Native Users of Spoken & Signed Languages other than Spoken English, Non- and Non-Native Users of Spoken English
Citizens	Residents, Immigrants, Migrants, Undocumented People
Citizens of First World or Global North Nations	Citizens of Third World or Global South Nations, Landless Nations / Peoples / Tribes
Adults	Children, Youth, Elderly
Heterosexuals	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer
Christians [Western Hemisphere]	Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus
Higher Caste (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas) [India]	Lower Caste (Shudras, Untouchables) [India]
Whites / People of European Descent	People of Color [North America]; Latinos /

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	Hispanics; People of Asian Descent; Indigenous / Native / First Nations [Canada] People; Blacks / People of African Descent; Coloreds [South Africa]; People of Arab Descent; Roma People [Europe]; People of Mixed-Race
Free Individuals	Incarcerated Individuals
Men	Women / Transgenders / Interesex
Owning Class / Wealthy / Upper Class / Middle Class	Working Class / Poor / Landless / Homeless
College Educated	Less Educated
Psychologically Healthy	Living with Psychological Challenges
Able-Bodied / Physically Healthy	Disabled / Living with Physical Challenges
Conforming to Predominant Beauty Standards	Not Conforming to Predominant Beauty Standards

Finally, keep in mind that a social group's dominance is often context-dependent. For instance, white men may not necessarily carry power, privilege, and rank in all circumstances. A white male who is a minority in terms of numbers in a multi-racial workplace may feel socially marginalised if he feels unable to engage in effective communication with his peers; however, he may also be perceived, even subconsciously, by the decision-makers, as more promotion-worthy.

Furthermore, how we connect with various social groups can be extremely complex. All of us likely identify with multiple dominant social groups and with multiple marginalised groups. The same applies to our coachees and coaching students. How aware we are of the cultures of dominant groups and the cultures of marginalised groups, and how we hold this complexity and intersectionality in our sessions and course rooms and within ourselves, takes on tremendous import. So when either or both parties are unconscious of the dynamics of power, privilege and rank that lie between us, there can be serious unintended consequences for the relationship. Through our interactive session at the Conference and this pre-work exercise, we invite our colleagues to focus in on the ways in which all of us--ACTO's current membership and stakeholders--carry power, privilege and rank.

### **Additional Resources**

Here are two sites that further explain the impact of unaware power, privilege and rank:

<http://www.knockalla.net/rank-how-power-and-privilege-affect-our-relationships/>

<http://www.slideshare.net/MeTApresents/power-issues-and-ranking-in-change-processes>

### Exercise

In light of the above, we invite you to explore the territory of culture, power, privilege and rank in your lives.

Think about a time when you were either with a group of people or one other person, and you felt unconfident, invisible, dismissed, out of place, or somehow experienced a micro-aggression. Now, imagine yourself in that situation again. Then explore the following questions:

- Who was there? In light of the above chart of dominant and marginalised social groups, how would I describe the person or group?
- What specific behaviors and/or attitudes surfaced that help explain how you were feeling?
- What about the physical setting may have contributed to my feelings?
- How did I feel internally? What emotions came up for me?
- How did I react in the moment?
- How did I end up leaving the group or the encounter?
- How did I make sense of the experience afterwards?
- How do I make sense of the experience now?

Now, think about a time when you were either with a group of people or one other person and, upon reflection, you were among the dominant social group(s). Now, imagine yourself in that situation again. Then explore the following questions:

- Who was there? In light of the above chart of dominant and marginalised social groups, how would I describe the person or group?
- Describe specific behaviors and/or attitudes that illustrate how power, privilege, and rank played out in that situation?
- What about the physical setting may have contributed to the dynamics in that situation?
- How did I feel internally at the time?
- How do I make sense of the experience now?
- What, if anything, about those specific behaviors and/or attitudes could I identify in myself?
- What would I have done differently, if anything, in that situation given my current reflections?

Of course, there are no right or wrong answers! Just deepening reflections and watering seeds of curiosity, insight and vulnerability.

We trust that this exercise, together with the process that we will be engaging at the Conference, will inspire you to continue learning about this topic, consider the importance of

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awareness of culture, power, privilege, and rank in your training organisations, and explore how to introduce and further integrate it into your organisational practices.

Please make notes on your reflections as you may wish to share and/or reflect on them during the session next week. Thank you in advance for experimenting, expanding and playing with us!

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