

Power, Privilege and Rank

In order to understand power more deeply, it is important to explore the factors and privileges that allow us to lay claim to power. Mindell (1995) provides a useful map for exploring the factors leading to power. These factors can be considered as privileges. He maps these privileges according to a ranking system. He defines rank as the "sum of a person's privileges" (1995, p.28) and sees it as a "conscious or unconscious, social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology or spiritual power." (1995, p.42) Depending on your position relative to others, you might have higher or lower rank on an attribute. The more rank you have, the more access you have to privilege and power in this area.

Rank is not always earned. The rank of being white in South Africa was an unearned privilege that I was not always aware of, but from which I benefited greatly and which assisted me in developing other rank benefits such as education and greater material comforts. Frequently, having rank in some areas allows the easier development of rank in other areas. The inverse can also be true. When we have rank in one particular area we might tend to rely on this rank and so not develop in other areas.

Categories of Rank

a. Social Rank

This form of rank is the ranking bestowed by the culture and society we live in. It embraces the value system as well as the biases and prejudices of the mainstream society, and bestows more privileges to some people and less to others.

b. Psychological Rank

Psychological rank occurs when you have developed internal resources and abilities so that you have greater personal comfort and ease in addressing challenging situations.

- This development might arise from personal psychological work where a greater familiarity with yourself in difficult life challenges occurs.
- Psychological rank might also arise in learning skills to deal with having lower social rank and managing in the world under this condition.

c. Spiritual Rank

Spiritual rank comes from a relationship to something divine or transcendent--gods, goddesses or spirits. It can occur naturally through personal spiritual training, or as a result of a reaction to having lesser social and psychological rank. It does not necessarily arise from religious practice or training, but rather from a connection to a divine or transcendental state which creates a detachment and experience of freedom outside of the wheel of ordinary life.

d. contextual rank

Each community or group has its own value system. Rank in a local context comes from having those qualities that have currency in the community. In many contexts, being popular, well-connected, an insider or old-timer gives one local rank.

e. Internal ranking

Effects of oppression are not only external but also change our inner landscape. We might value certain qualities or tendencies more than others. Outer oppression can lead to internalized oppression. We have a form of inner ranking between different parts of us that often represents a set of mainstream values.

Recognizing and Using Rank and Power

Eldership and the Use of Rank

Rank, privilege and power exist. Attempts by some to eliminate a ranking system and thereby reduce power and its abuses has not been successful. We live in a world where rank is evident and is in use all the time. The challenge we have is to use the rank we have well. The effective use of rank has the potential to transform ourselves and those around us. Even if done on a small scale, using rank well changes the world in which we live.

Recognizing Rank

Mindell states that rank is a drug. The more you have, the less aware you are of how it effects others negatively. When we use it poorly, we suffer, our relationships with others suffer and we create an unhappy world around us. Recognizing that we have rank might sound simple, but it is a challenging process. Most of us recognize the places where we might not have rank.

The misuse of rank results in difficult relationship interactions and conflicts, particularly with those who do not have this rank and are suffering through our unconscious use of rank over them. Frequently those who are in less powerful positions know more about who has rank and the effects of rank and power than those who wield this rank.

Using Rank

Once we recognize rank we are in a much easier place to use it consciously, with wisdom and care for ourselves and others. The use and misuse of rank is often extremely subtle and our openness to those who might be subjected to it and their feedback is important.

Effective use of social rank: There are many examples of people who have used social rank wisely. Nelson Mandela (1994a) is a good current example.

Effective use of spiritual rank: The life of Martin Luther King Jr. (1998) is a testament to the effective use of spiritual rank. In a period in the history of the United States where people of color were denied equal rights, he focused not only on the suffering of his people, the African American people, but on his vision of equality for all.