

Introduction to Rank and Power



People have different kinds and amounts of power. The concept of 'rank' can help us figure out what's going on in our groups in terms of power dynamics.

It was originally developed by Process Work and further developed by Training for Change. It's an approach that underlies Rhizome's work. If we brush power-related issues under the carpet, it can fuel conflict and marginalise those with less rank.

What do we mean by rank?

Rank is the power we have relative to one another in relationships, groups, communities and the world. Our rank is the sum of our privileges. Some kinds of rank are gained through life experience, others we are born in to. It is fluid and complex, and it depends on both the immediate context and the wider context. Everyone has both high and low rank at the same time, though in different amounts. For example, a white man can have less power than others in a given context, even though at the same time he still carries the rank of being white and male.

There are different kinds of rank:

Social rank: the power that we have due to our social and cultural standing as part of a dominant group in society. These factors can be based on: ethnicity, gender, age, economics, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, education, health, body shape, and language.

Structural rank: the power we get in a particular setting, whether this is from our formal titles or positions at work, or informal and hidden rank. It can also be based on our status in a community.

Spiritual rank: the power we get from feeling we have justice or a divine power on our side. It can keep us centred in the midst of a 'storm'.

Psychological rank: the power we have if we feel secure in ourselves, from self-awareness and self-esteem. There are different sources, such as having been loved as a child, having our perceptions validated and having overcome difficulties and challenges, or surviving oppression and coming out the other side.

Rank dynamics and signals

Rank isn't good or bad, it just is. The key is to be aware of it and the privileges that come with it, and take responsibility accordingly. The most important thing we can do is to work towards increasing our awareness of rank and make sure that that knowledge guides and shapes our actions.

We tend to be unaware of our higher rank (and privileges), we just feel good, and think we are 'normal'. Yet we are often sorely aware of our own lower rank & the impacts that can have on us.

This lack of awareness can fuel conflict and prevent a group thriving - if we identify only with our low rank and are unconscious of our own high rank. This is also true vice versa, when we can marginalise our own low rank (e.g. feelings of vulnerability and weaknesses). We can also become unintentionally invested in holding on to our rank and privileges.

However, even when we are unaware of our rank, other people will notice it through our communication style or the double signals we give.

What can we do?

As a facilitator or as a participant-facilitator, you can:

- learn more about your own higher and lower rank, and the sources of that social, structural, spiritual and psychological rank (be careful not to focus only on your lack of rank!)
- reflect on past or present situations where these complex dynamics could be fueling conflict and miscommunication, and the different feelings you have in the midst of it all
- explore the impact your rank could have on other people
- read about marginalised groups and the oppression they or you suffer, past and present
- think about how mainstream people are oppressed by mainstream cultural norms
- celebrate the rank that you have and identify how you can use it, with awareness, to benefit others
- share these learnings with others in your team, group or organisation, even when it feels edgy!

Here are some signals that can help us be aware of our own and others' rank:

Higher rank	Lower rank
feelings of ease, comfort and confidence	shaking, sweating, not catching another's eye, feelings of agitation and inadequacy
comfortable with speaking and leading discussions	finding it hard to take the floor or stand up for yourself
sitting back reflectively, analytically or meditatively, not feeling the need to speak	feeling crazy and out of step with 'normal' people, that everyone except you understands the 'game' and how it's played
more balanced, centred and emotionally fluid	lack of clarity and ability to think
feeling entitled	settling for things, not pursuing dreams and desires
insightful	feelings of a desire for revenge
strength of emotional conviction	adapting behaviour, always agreeing and saying 'yes' but with double-signals that say 'no'
dismissive of another's thoughts and feelings	placating and complimenting
in charge of own availability: time, place and duration	feeling overlooked, that your position is insignificant or no-one else feels like you
in control of communication style, and tending to be rational and calm and expecting the same from others	practising what you say before speaking
thinking it's the other person in a conflict or relationship issue that has the problem	self-doubt, blaming, insecure or feeling inferior
objective, detached, condescending or patronising	emotional, upset, angry, feeling misunderstood or desperate
sense of superiority, self-confidence or smugness	lack of self-esteem