



The Culture of Power¹

by Paul Kivel

IF YOU ARE A WOMAN and you have ever walked into a men's meeting, or a person of color and have walked into a white organization, or a child who walked into the principal's office, or a Jew or Muslim who entered a Christian space, then you know what it is like to walk into a culture of power that is not your own. You may feel insecure, unsafe, disrespected, unseen or marginalized. You know you have to tread carefully.

Whenever one group of people accumulates more power than another group, the more powerful group creates an environment that places its members at the cultural center and other groups at the margins. People in the more powerful group (the "in-group") are accepted as the norm, so if you are in that group it can be very hard for you to see the benefits you receive.

Since I'm male and I live in a culture in which men have more social, political, and economic power than women, I often don't notice that women are treated differently than I am. I'm inside a male culture of power. I expect to be treated with respect, to be listened to, and to have my opinions valued. I expect to be welcomed. I expect to see people like me in positions of authority. I expect to find books and newspapers that are written by people like me, that reflect my perspective, and that show me in central roles. I don't necessarily notice that the women around me are treated less respectfully, ignored, or silenced; that they are not visible in positions of authority nor welcomed in certain spaces; and that they are charged more for a variety of goods and services and are not always safe in situations where I feel perfectly comfortable.

Remember when you were a young person entering a space that reflected an adult culture of power—a classroom, store, or office where adults were in charge? What let you know that you were on adult turf, that adults were at the center of power?

Some of the things I remember are that adults were in control. They made the decisions. They might be considerate enough to ask

¹ Adapted by the author from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*



me what I thought, but they did not have to take my concerns into account. I could be dismissed at any time, so I learned to be cautious. I could look around and see what was on the walls, what music was being played, what topics were being discussed, and most important, who made those decisions, and I knew that this was an adult culture of power.

I felt I was under scrutiny. I had to change my behavior—how I dressed (“pull up your pants”, “tuck in your shirt”), how I spoke (“speak up”, “don’t mumble”), even my posture (“sit up, don’t slouch”, “look me in the eye when I’m talking to you”)—so that I would be accepted and heard. I couldn’t be as smart as I was or I’d be considered a smart aleck. I had to learn the adults’ code, talk about what they wanted to talk about, and find allies among them—adults who would speak up for my needs in my absence. Sometimes I had to cover up my family background and religion in order to be less at risk from adult disapproval. And if there was any disagreement or problem between an adult and myself, I had little credibility. The adult’s word was almost always believed over mine.

The effects on young people of an adult culture of power are similar to the effects on people of color of a white culture of power or the effects on women of a male culture of power. As an adult I rarely notice that I am surrounded by an adult culture of power, which often puts young people and their cultures at a severe disadvantage as they are judged, valued, and given credibility or not by adults on adult terms. Similarly, as a white person, when I’m driving on the freeway I am unlikely to notice that people of color are being pulled over based on skin color. Or when I am in a store I am unlikely to notice that people of color are being followed, not being served as well, or being charged more for the same items. I assume that everyone can vote as easily as I can and that everyone’s vote counts. I am never asked where I am from (and this would be true even if I had stepped off the boat yesterday). In a society that proclaims equal opportunity I may not even believe that other people are being paid less than I am for the same work, or being turned away from jobs and housing because of the color of their skin. When I am in public spaces, the music played in the background, the art on the walls, the language spoken, the layout of the space, the design of the buildings are all things I might not even notice because, as a white person, I am so comfortable with them. If I did notice them I would probably consider them bland, culturally neutral items. Most of the time I am so much inside the white culture of power, it is so invisible to



me, that I have to rely on people of color to point out to me what it looks like, what it feels like, and what impact it has on them.

We can learn to notice the culture of power around us. Recently I was giving a talk at a large Midwestern university and was shown to my room in the hotel run by the university's hotel management department. When I had put my suitcase down and hung up my clothes, I looked around the room. There were two pictures on the wall. One was of a university baseball team from many years ago—22 white men wearing their team uniforms. The other picture was of a science lab class—14 students, 13 white men and 1 white woman dressed in lab coats and working at lab benches. In total I had 35 white men and 1 white woman on the walls of my room. “This clearly tells me who’s in charge at this university,” I said to myself, and it would probably send an unwelcoming, cautionary message to many people of color and white women who stayed in that room that they could expect to be excluded from the culture of power in this institution. I mentioned the composition of the pictures to the hotel management and referred to it again in my talk the next day. A few years ago I would not have “seen” these pictures in terms of race and gender. The pictures themselves, of course, are only symbolic. But as I walked around the campus, talked with various officials, and heard about the racial issues being dealt with, I could see that these symbols were part of the construction of a culture of power from which people of color and most white women were mostly excluded. I have learned that noticing how the culture of power works in any situation provides a lot of information about who has power and privilege, and who is vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion, and this institution of higher education was no exception.

The problem with a culture of power is that it reinforces the prevailing hierarchy. When we are inside a culture of power we expect to have things our way, the way we are most comfortable with. We may go through life complacent in our monoculturalism, not even aware of the limits of our perspectives, the gaps in our knowledge, the inadequacy of our understanding. We remain unaware of the superior status and opportunities we have simply because we’re white, or male, or able-bodied, or heterosexual. Of course a culture of power also dramatically limits the ability of those on the margins to participate in an event, a situation, or an organization. They are only able to participate on unfavorable terms, at others’ discretion, which puts them at a big disadvantage. They often have to give up or hide much of who they are to participate in the dominant culture. And if there are any problems it becomes very easy to identify the people on the margins as the



source of those problems and blame or attack them rather than the problem itself.

Every organization has work to do to become more inclusive. I want to focus on some ways that groups often fail to include members of our country's most marginalized members—those marginalized by economic status, physical ability, and English language ability.

Often, when groups talk about diversity issues, they address those issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation that are most visible. Without an understanding of how class limits people's ability to participate in organizations a group may end up with a remarkably diverse group—of middle class participants. Those who are homeless, poor, single parents, working two jobs, or poorly educated (and many people fall into more than one of these categories) are unable to attend meetings or events because they cannot afford the time, the fees, the childcare, or the energy. When they do make it they may feel unwelcome because they have not been as able to participate previously, because they do not speak the language (or the jargon) of the organizers, or because they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the middle class values and styles of the group.

People with disabilities can be similarly excluded when meetings are held in rooms and buildings which are not accessible, when signing is not provided, when accessible public transportation is not available, or when the pace and organization of the meeting does not allow them to participate.

People for whom English is not their primary language may face comparable barriers to finding out about meetings, attending events, becoming part of the leadership of an organization, or simply participating as a member when interpretation is not provided, when non-English media and communication networks are not utilized, or, again, when the pace and style of the group does not allow for the slower pace that a multi-lingual process calls for.

I am Jewish in a Christian culture. I am often aware of ways that the dominant culture of organizations I work with exclude me. When I get together with other Jews in a group I can feel so relieved that we are all Jewish that I can fail to notice ways that parts of the Jewish community have been excluded. Because I am in the culture of power in terms of disability I can overlook the fact that we may all be Jews in the group, but we have scheduled a meeting or event in a place that is not accessible. We may all be



Jewish, but we may have failed to do outreach into the Jewish lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities. Or because we are predominantly middle class Jews during our discussions we may be unaware of how we are excluding Jews who are poor or working class.

We each have ways that we are in the culture of power (for me, for example, as a white male) and ways that we are marginalized (for me as a Jew). Although we may be good at recognizing how we have been excluded, we are probably less adept at realizing how we exclude others because it is not as much a survival issue for us. We have to look to people from those groups to provide leadership for us.

It is important that we learn to recognize the culture of power in our organizations so that we can challenge the hierarchy of power it represents and the confinement of some groups of people to its margins. Use the previous paragraphs and the questions below to guide you in thinking about the culture of power in your organization.

Assessing the culture of power

What does the culture of power look like in your organization? In your office or area where you work? In your school or classroom? In your living room or living space? In your congregation? Where you shop for clothes? In agencies whose services you use?

The following questions can be used to identify cultures of power based on gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, race, language, physical ability, immigrant status, or education.

1. Who is in authority?
2. Who has credibility (whose words and ideas are listened to with most attention and respect)?
3. Who is treated with full respect?
4. Whose experience is valued?
5. Whose voices are heard?
6. Who has access to or is given important information?
7. Who talks most at meetings?
8. Whose ideas are given importance?
9. Who is assigned to or expected to take on background roles?
10. How is the space designed? Who has physical access?



11. What is on the walls?
12. What language(s) are used? Which are acceptable?
13. What music and food is available? Who provides it?
14. How much are different people paid? How are prices determined?
15. Who cleans up?
16. Who decides?

Every person has the right to complete respect, equitable access, and full participation. Anything less limits the effectiveness of an organization by denying it the contributions—the experiences, insights and creative input—of those individuals and groups excluded or discriminated against.

Those inside the culture of power rarely notice it, while those excluded are often acutely sensitive to how they and others are being marginalized. Therefore leadership in efforts to eliminate the culture of power need to come from those in excluded or marginalized groups. Unless they are in leadership positions, with sufficient respect, status, and authority, the organization's efforts to change will be token, insufficient, and have limited effectiveness.

As they become better at identifying patterns of exclusion, people from within the culture of power can learn to take leadership in identifying marginalizing practices so that the organization doesn't have to rely as much on people at the margins to do this work for it. Although groups will always need to look to the insights of people at the margins to completely identify how systems of oppression are currently operating, there is an important role for those inside the culture of power to take leadership as allies to those excluded. They can challenge the status quo and can educate other "insiders" who are resistant to change. It is precisely because they have more credibility, status, and access that people on the inside make good allies. They can do this best not by speaking for or representing those marginalized, but by challenging the status quo and opening up opportunities for others to step forward and speak for themselves.

Every institution of higher education has a culture of power. And each department, division, school, program, and office within it has its own subculture of power. These may not be consistent or overlapping. The university may have an educated white male administration while the women's studies department has a middle



class white woman's culture of power which excludes poor and working class white women and women of color of all classes. To be in opposition to the prevailing culture of power does not preclude us from creating subcultures of power that, in turn, exclude others who are even more marginalized than we are.

We have a responsibility, as people who have had access to educational opportunities, not to let the fact of our being on the inside of a culture of power allow us to deny educational opportunity to those who are on the outside. We need to fight for equal opportunity and full access and inclusion not just for those groups that we are a part of, but also for those groups we are not. For most of us that means listening to those on the margins, acknowledging our insider status compared to some other groups, and acknowledging our access to power, our resources, and our privileges. Then we can work with others to use our power, resources, and privileges to open up the educational structures to those who continue to knock on the doors.

One of our goals should be to create organizations and institutions that embrace an internal culture of full inclusion and all of whose members are trained to think critically about how the culture of power operates. We each have a role to play, we each have much to contribute to creating such organizations and pushing every group we are a part of to move from a culture of power to a culture of inclusion.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.