



The Power Chart Revisited

by **Paul Kivel**

| MORE POWERFUL | LESS POWERFUL |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Adults | Children, Seniors |
| Men | Women |
| Rich | Poor |
| White | People of Color |
| Boss | Worker |
| Heterosexual | LGBT |
| Able-Bodied | Disabled |
| Formally Educated | Non-formally educated |
| Born in U.S. | Immigrant |
| Christian | Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist |

THE POWER CHART ILLUSTRATED ABOVE is a widely used tool in workshops and trainings across the country. Sometimes used as an explicit exercise—as laid out in *Men's Work* or *Helping Teens Stop Violence*—more often implicit in the theory motivating our work, the power chart, and the concepts on which it is built, has become inlaid in much of the training on issues of family violence, sexual assault, racism, multiculturalism, homophobia, and gender.

It is a very useful tool. I use it consistently in my work because I think it clears away some of the misunderstanding about where power lies and how it is used. It makes a direct connection between power and violence, and provides a social and political framework for understanding more particular issues of interpersonal relationships. It can illustrate the link between institutional, interpersonal and internalized oppression in ways that few other models can do.

However, like all models, it distorts and oversimplifies reality, and consequently may contribute to furthering some of the oppression we are trying to eliminate. It may also confuse some



key issues and relationships that keep our work from being more effective in promoting social justice.

Let's look at the chart more closely and more critically. We immediately notice how simple, neat, and tidy it is. The categories are simple and most people can decide quickly into which boxes they fall, where they can "locate" themselves on the chart. They can see that they are oppressors and oppressed, privileged or not, targets of violence or not (depending on your language). The chart makes it seem like the world is not only neat and tidy, but binary and polarized. Of course, reality is not so tidy, or for that matter, not neatly divided into two.

It is a mark of Western (primarily Christian) culture to assume that most concepts can be divided into two opposed qualities, such as good and evil, clean and dirty, light and dark, etc. Western logic is based on an either/or philosophical bias dating back to the early Greek philosophers. This is only one way, and not always the most accurate way of understanding the world. In dividing our social reality into opposing pairs we may be reinforcing the use of western values, precisely when we are trying to challenge western hegemony.

But aren't most of the categories really pretty simple? Perhaps—but more likely not.

The first binary category, adult/child, is meant to convey the power relationships between adults and children, but certainly it over-simplifies. In what category do adolescents fall? Less powerful in relation to adult society, but more powerful than younger people. At what point does someone become an adult? It depends on class and race, etc. At what point does someone lose access to adult power? Women earlier than men, some men not at all. Some people are never accorded full adult status, i.e. they are treated like children for all of their lives. Because age is tied to appearance, which is tied to physical and cultural factors, the status of adult is a very slippery one to define. It remains slippery at the other end. At some highly variable age depending on class, race, gender, physical ability, educational level and health, we each become older, senior. Whether this enhances or decreases our status and power is also variable. In general, older people are less fully powerful compared to middle-aged adults. However, many of the most powerful people in our society, including those holding most economic and political power are senior citizens.



So, if age categories don't work so well, how about race? Besides the obvious fact that *race* as a biological category doesn't exist, don't the words *white* and *people of color* convey some kind of difference in power? Again, there is a usefulness in describing our society this way, as long as we are aware of the limits of our discourse. What is *white* has been variously defined to include or exclude southern Europeans, eastern Europeans, European Jews, Irish, Asians and Mexicans of Spanish origin. Some people say that it means the way you are responded to when you walk down the street. In other words, are you seen and responded to as *white*? Depends on what neighborhood you venture into, and in contrast to whom? But aren't people of color easily recognizable? Except those who pass—and there are many who do. Such a simple opposition doesn't account for the multitudes who are bi-racial, or multi-racial—and that includes a sizable minority of Americans. The fact is that some people are the result of intermarriage or rape and their very existence contradicts the simple distinctions of the chart.

In addition, race as a binary category doesn't work well because there is no group "people of color." There is barely a group called Asian-American or Latino. The specificities of people's cultures, countries of origin, resistance to racism and identities are so important and diverse that such a simple category begs more questions than it answers. Only by defining people against whiteness, and therefore perpetuating their invisibility can we maintain such a polarity. But isn't that what we are trying to change?

Does the category of heterosexual/Lesbian, gay and bisexual work any better? What if we add transgender? (I have noticed some people add transgender without fully understanding what it means and who they are because it is "correct"). In any case, sexual orientation is a highly fluid, fluctuating quality. It is certainly not an either/or characteristic. How much sexual latitude is tolerated in "heterosexuals" at any given time is changeable. Some people's sexual identity remains unchanged for a lifetime, but for many it evolves. Many people have some attraction to people of both the same and other gender and depending upon complex factors may act on one or the other, or both, over the course of their lives. Sexual orientation is more likely a continuum than a polarity, and a flexible, fluid one at that. Defining sexual orientation as a political position doesn't make it any easier



because political definitions change as well. Finally, tying sexual orientation to gender may not anchor it securely.

Although controversial, there is mounting evidence that human biology is complex and even anatomy is not always as precise as we would like it to be. Not only do women pass as men and men as women, but we can alter people's sexuality through medical means. Even at birth many children are much less clearly male or female than we might want to admit.

Clearly, men have more political power and women have less. However, the reification of that binary opposition may be the result of emphasizing biological difference more than political reality. If that is the case we need to question how much we reinforce the opposition in our strategies of resistance. If, as many of us believe, female psychology is simply the projection of certain qualities onto women by patriarchy, and that biological qualities of body size, genitalia, hairiness, and breast size are more overlapping than distinct, then we need to be careful to focus our attention on the political results of gender polarization without contributing to a widespread belief in some inherent, biological differences between men and women that the chart can appear to represent.

Briefly, about other lines on the chart. We are all physically challenged at different times in different ways in our lives. From infancy to death we each have temporary and permanent physical challenges. There is no easy "us and them" here either.

And who was born here in the U.S.? When? The violence against immigrants is perpetrated by the children of some immigrants. Other people, such as many Asian-Americans, who may have lived here for generations are still treated like immigrants. Another example: Native Americans were never immigrants, but don't have the status of those in power who are the descendants of immigrants.

Who is a boss? Many people are somewhere in a chain of command. They have a boss, and they boss others. Some "front line" workers have tremendous job-derived power over clients and customers. *Boss* is actually a left-over term from the times when owners and bosses were the same. Is a small family business owner or director of a small non-profit part of a class of people with power? They can fire or hire their employees, but how much social, political or economic power do they actually have?



Anti-semitism is hard to fit in as well. Do we write Christian/Jew? But many non-Christians contribute to anti-semitism. Gentile/Jew still focuses on Christianity, as does Christian/Jew, Muslim, Buddhist—losing the specific focus on anti-semitism. And what about Catholics? Do they get a separate category because of discrimination they face, or are they too much a part of the Christian majority?

Every line on the chart is more complex, less binary than it appears at first glance.

Another weakness of the chart is that because all these qualities are put into a parallel structure, it can begin to look like these are parallel issues. Racism is just like sexism which is just like class. Although there are some similarities in how these issues work in our society, the differences are crucial. Racism is not like sexism, both in large and small ways—ways which dramatically affect our strategies for challenging them. It is very easy to mislead people into thinking that our society is really very simple and therefore our strategies for change can be also. They may also believe that if we just attack injustice, or inequality, or prejudice we will eliminate them all. There is no evidence that this is so.

Just as human qualities don't fall into tidy boxes, lines and charts, neither do whole people. No one is simply a lesbian, or able-bodied, or male, or boss without that automatically being mediated by class, race, gender, health, age, religion, etc. The chart doesn't speak to the complexity of human lives. For example, a women, who has a particular religion, sexual orientation, class, age, etc. doesn't relate to a man without noticing his class, race and age, and vice versa.

Every issue is inextricably intertwined with the others. The chart, however, contains the issues in separate categories. For example, because race and racial identity are clearly marked on the white/people of color line, it can reinforce people's misconception that other lines don't include race. In fact, most people in our society generally believe that gay and lesbian issues are white issues, and that disability issues are white issues. The construction of the chart can make it difficult to challenge racism in these areas both within the general public and within the target group itself. Unless we are challenging people to make the connections by breaking down the categories on the chart we may be contributing to the racism and homophobia, able-ism, etc. that we are fighting against.



It is the complexities of the issues, and the multiple sites of our lives, that make particular political alliances problematic and strategic analysis so important. Those with power confound and confuse us with the complexities of race, gender and class unless we are teaching people to critically analyze these intertwinings. How else can we understand the situations surrounding Clarence Thomas, William Kennedy Smith, Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, Robert Packwood and George Bush, to mention only a few complex male identities?

Every line on the chart needs much more in-depth focus, discussion and cross-fertilization with the other lines than we generally give them. In this sense the chart is a good beginning for a discussion rather than the final word. We need to let go of our need to convince people of the validity of the chart and use their questions to explore it more deeply. Even these discussions, however, need to occur in a larger understanding of why we use the chart and what our workshops are all about.

There are two larger issues which I want to focus on because I think that our failure to analyze the political implications of our work can derail us from effective strategies for social change. Both complications result from the way the power chart sets us up to think about politics and power.

The first problem is that because the visual focus of attention is on the relationship between, for example, men and women, it can look like changing the power imbalance between men and women is a question of mediating the relationship between men and women. Many of us use concepts of becoming allies in working with the chart that perpetuate this misconception. We talk about men becoming allies of women, whites of people of color, etc. We are, in fact, proposing an intergroup (and interpersonal) model of social change. Historically, this is not how change actually happens. Women's economic and political gains have come because women have organized themselves for change, have built alliances and mobilized for particular transformations in social policy. Some men have supported them, many have not. Most resisted change. Some men were allies in sympathy, but inactive in social struggle. Some male allies treated their female friends and partners better and some did not. Few were on the front lines challenging patriarchy. Similarly, workers, people of color, lesbians and gays, the physically challenged—each group has organized themselves for social change, not waited for allies to step forward.



Using the chart as we do may focus our attention away from the realities of social struggle and into the fuzzy dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Away from the specifics of how people have historically organized themselves for social change and into the more popular arena of how men should treat women and what women should expect from men. This can leave men (or white people, etc.) trying to change their attitudes and behavior towards particular women, without putting their bodies on the line for institutional change. It can also leave women once again focused on men (or people of color on white people), rather than on their common political situation, and logical strategies for resistance.

It is important that we support women in identifying and challenging male behavior which is abusive, discriminatory and/or sexist. It is worthwhile to help men see that they can be sexist because they have the power to enforce gender-based norms which are unjust. It is important for men and women to understand that reverse sexism does not exist. Unfortunately, if we leave people with only this understanding we have left them focused on the interpersonal level, without tools for understanding the institutional structures that will perpetuate injustice even if most men were to stop acting out sexism. Institutional practices such as unequal wages, job segregation, glass ceilings, lack of equal educational opportunity, inadequate health care and domestic violence can only be effectively addressed at the level of social policy. Unless we can also keep our attention on social policy issues and strategies most people will continue to see social change as change in individual growth, awareness and sensitivity.

The second way that the chart may mislead us politically is that the economic structure that frames our lives is obscured rather than clarified. The chart lends itself to talking about oppression rather than exploitation, downplaying the economic basis for much of the structural inequalities in our society. Further, because it can look like we are all on both sides of the chart, sometimes oppressors, sometimes oppressed, it can seem like no one really wins big. We're all tied into a cycle of violence, moving into and out of different powerful and less powerful roles. In fact, there is a ruling class in the United States that controls most of the wealth and political power in the country. This top 1% (or 10%, depending upon where you draw the line) is invisible to most of us most of the time. They do not live, work, play or go to school with



the rest of us. The chart perpetuates their invisibility because it focuses on those of us in the room and our relationships, men and women, adult and young people, whites and people of color. Even when it focuses on people not in the room we rarely clearly identify the fundamental economic divisions in our society.

I would not argue that economics determines everything else. I am using the word exploitation to include the appropriation of land, labor, reproduction, culture and spiritual practices. Most real life resistance to the “isms” comes from groups of people fighting against particular instances of exploitation at work, at home, in the neighborhood, etc. Unless we help people analyze the forms this exploitation takes, we may be distracting them from the institutional systems of power. The chart, by giving us all multiple identities, diminishes the importance of class and obscures where organized sources of power exist such as in corporations and the military. There is a locus of power found within the ruling class of this country that is different from, and obscured by, the other issues the power chart represents.

Ironically, just as the chart can make it seem like all oppressions are similar, it can make us all seem very separate. If we look at the chart and identify our particular struggles the emphasis is on the particular ethnic, gender-based and other identity-based resistance to oppression. Historically, however, alliances have been built and struggle made more effective when such boundaries were broken down. When the women's movement realized that women of color and working women could be part of the movement more power was created. When the unions expanded to include workers of color and women workers the unions became more powerful. The chart pushes us towards seeing our struggles as separate, and the organizing for social change based on identity during the last 40 years in the United States as predominant. Where is there room to talk about and recreate the broad-based movements for social change that have shaken the world in so many other countries? In this area the chart is better for helping to understand how people have been excluded than for developing strategies for inclusion.

There is one more issue that I think we need to pay attention to, given the pre-eminent role that the United States plays in the world economy. We could, I suppose, have a line on the chart that has the United States on the powerful side and most of the rest of the world on the other side (and we could discuss where Germany, Japan, etc. might fit). However we don't generally use



such a line and the chart focuses on power dynamics internal to the United States. How do we bring an international understanding to our work? How would it change our understanding of all the other categories if we regularly included an international line? How would it better reflect the transnational political, economic and military realities of our times and thereby enable us to develop more appropriate organizing strategies?

We must continue to use the power chart in our education and prevention work because we need the social/political framework it provides. Such a framework is completely lacking in most of the training, education, counseling and therapy taking place in this the country. The power chart helps politicize people's understanding of their lives. However, we also have to analyze the nature of the politics it brings up and the kinds of strategies it leads people towards. It can be a tool for bringing up and questioning the basis for power and organizing in our society. Or it can perpetuate and lock people in to a more conservative, binary analysis that limits strategies for change.

The choice is up to us.



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