

A Tool for Everyone

Revelations from the “Power Flower”

by Wenb-In Ng based on Doris Marshall Institute

What It Is

The “Power Flower” is a tool developed by Canadian social change educators when working with groups to “identify who we are (and who we aren’t) as individuals and as a group in relation to those who wield power in our society.” (*Educating for a Change*, p. 87) The centre of a daisy-type flower is divided into 16 segments, each representing one facet or category of our social identity (see diagram on page 54). This centre is surrounded by a double set of petals, one outer, one inner. The outer petals describe the dominant or powerful identities in society. The inner petals are filled in by participants and describe the social identity of each individual. The object of the exercise is to discover how close, or how distant, each person is to the dominant identity of their current society. The more inner petals match the outer (dominant) ones, the more social power that person possesses.

Often one or more centre segments are left blank for the group to identify aspects or categories of social identity that carry special power significance peculiar to their context. For instance, in a church, the category “lay” or “order of ministry” would be weighted with significance, with power implications. In anti-racism work, whether a person is born in Canada or outside Canada would likely make a difference.

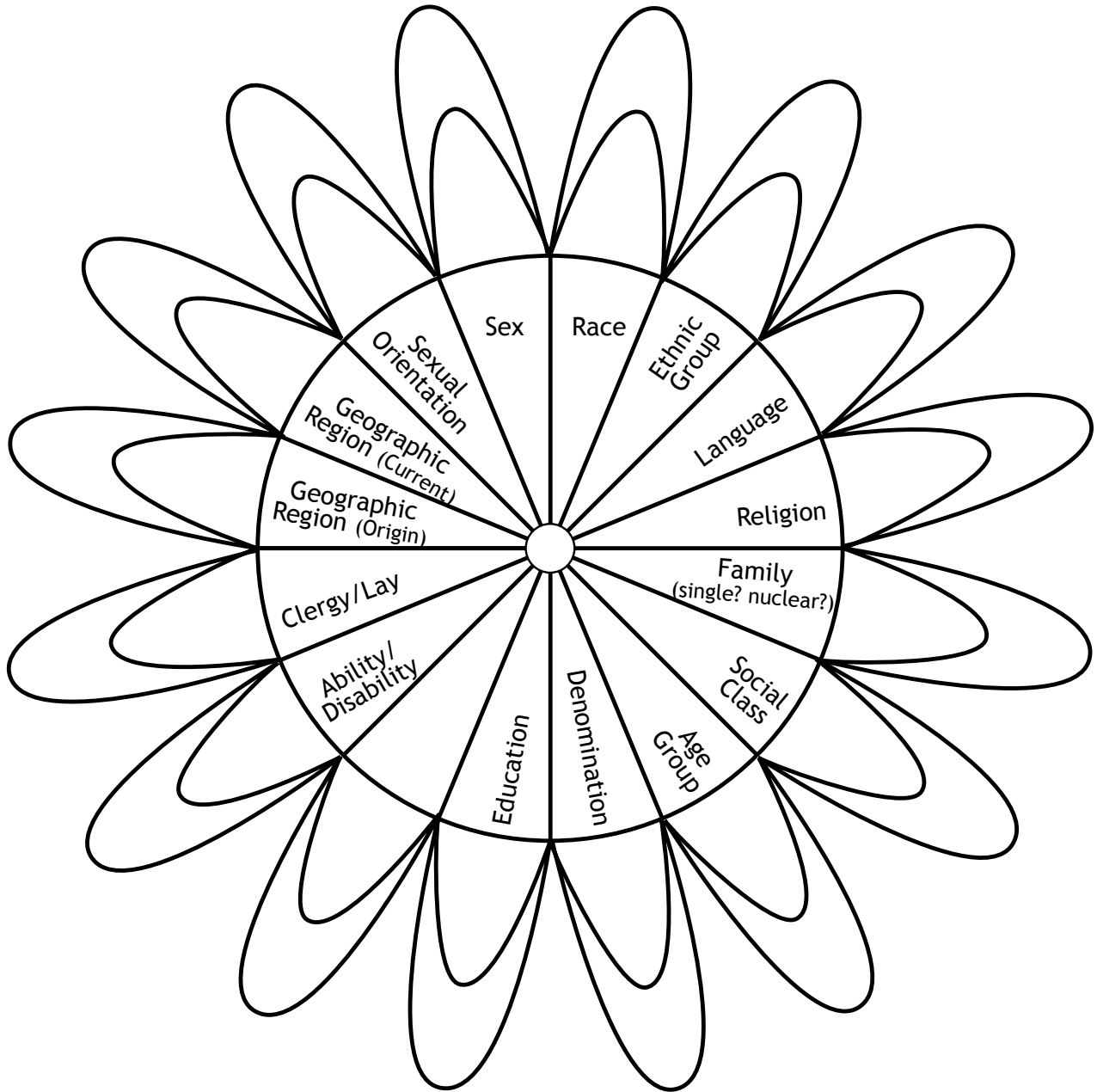
How the Exercise Works

When planning to do this exercise, you need to duplicate enough copies of the flower (with the segments named - but see below) for the whole group, leaving the petals blank. Make a large replica of the diagram on a sheet of newsprint and tape it on the wall or flipchart. Then follow these steps:

- Step 1** Introduce the purpose and rationale of the power flower, referring to the flower on newsprint.
- Step 2** Working as a group, fill in the outer petals together. For instance, when completing the social dominance category, it would not be too difficult to agree that “white” should go in the outer petal. The same might go for “English” in the language category language, and “heterosexual” in the sexual orientation category. Distribute one blank individual diagram and have everyone transfer these outer petal descriptions onto their individual sheets.
- Step 3** Working individually or in pairs, have participants locate themselves in each inner petal on their own sheet. Count up the number of matching petals, noticing which match. Let each pair compare their results with that of their neighbours, making observations as they go along.
- Step 4** In the large group, ask people to come forward and transfer their inner petal locations onto the inner petals of the large flower. This makes up the composite, communal social identity of your group.

Reflecting on the Results

The Power Flower



Adapted with permission from *Educating for a Change* by Rick Arnold, Bev Burke, Carl James, D'Arcy Martin, and Barb Thomas (Toronto: Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action and Between the Lines Press, 1991).

Personal social identity: Count how many of your petals are different from the dominant outer petals, which means you do not share those areas of power conferred by society. What light does this throw on the way you have been treated as a person of privilege or as a marginalized person? Which of these cannot be changed (for example, where you were born, your sex), and which ones could be changed (e.g. level of education)?

Group social identity: What does the composite picture tell you about who you are as a group? Are you fairly privileged? In what ways are you not privileged? How might this affect, for example, the way you might go about anti-racism work? If your church is located in a neighbourhood that has changed quite substantially in recent years, what kind of power flower pattern might your “neighbours” present, and how much would it differ from your group flower? What implications would this pose to your church’s outreach ministry?

Interpersonal relations within your group: Notice who has fewer matching petals and thus less social power, and who has more. How can you turn this knowledge to advantage as the group works together? As you make decisions? For instance, you might as a group decide to take measures to make sure members with less power do get a chance to be heard. How do you as leader/facilitator compare with your group members? What does this reveal about possible tensions?

Reflect on the unequal weight given some of the categories, for example, race or social-economic class, and thus the need to adjust the “power quotient” wielded by some petals over others.

What to Expect

As this exercise reveals aspects of our social identity that we are often not aware of, sometimes the unveiling can cause pain, anger, or even denial. A person who feels personally powerless is confronted by the fact that regardless of how she might feel, she is seen as wielding quite a bit of power by society in general. On the other hand, someone who feels personally responsible for not having succeeded may be freed from self-blame when they see that there are structural reasons holding them back. Helping one another untangle the personal from the structural can help us move forward with anti-racism work and with our struggle to seek justice against other oppressions.

For further explanations, refer to pp. 13 to 15 and pp. 87 to 88 in *Educating for a Change*.

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