## Status and Hierarchy as a Sensitive Zone

Introduction: Why are status and power issues a sensitive zone?

Status is everywhere

Participating in a Balinese cock fight[1], spending thousands of euros on a luxury fashion accessory, earning a wage that is 250 times bigger than the average worker, throwing down a cliff a beautiful blanket[2], are seemingly very distinct phenomena, yet underneath all of them we find a common thread: concerns about status and power. Status and power relations permeate all domains of human activity, they seem to be everywhere, as Bertrand Russel pointed out almost a century ago: "the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics. Like energy, power has many forms, such as wealth, armaments, civil authority, and influence on opinion. No one of these can be regarded as subordinate to any other, and there is no one form from which the others are derivative." (Russell, 1938.).
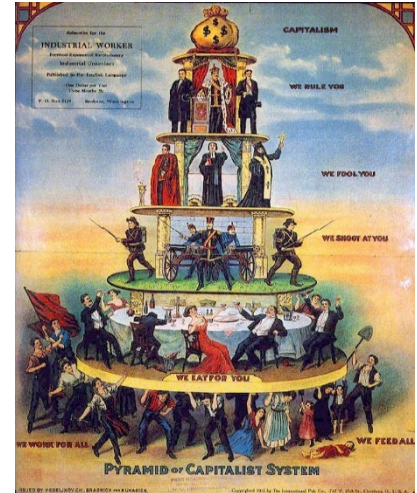
The two concepts from the two seemingly distinct realms are even better connected in the notion of mana, which refers to the spiritual life force, energy that is present in everyone and everything permeating the whole universe in Melanesian and Polynesian cultures. Besides being the life force, mana is also power, authority, ownership, status, influence, dignity, and respect (Mutu, 2011). In the following we'll try to show that power relations constitute one of the most important sensitive zones that affect the lives of people attending intercultural trainings as much as the dynamics within the training room.

We'll start from the concept of status to denote that symbolic force which is distributed unequally amongst people, introduce the notion of hierarchy to describe how this distribution happens in asymmetrical ways and deal with power-relations as the consequence of unequal distribution of status (individual or group-based). Status is ontological, a question of life and death. The word "status" is derived from the Latin root whose meanings are to stand, to make, to be firm[3] It is not to be taken light-heartedly: status regulates our relationship to others and is a key organising principle of social life. Touching on the border between individual and collective, it is easily

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[1] Reference is made here to Geertz' famous study of the Balinese cock fight, discussing the importance of this custom for establishing and challenging social hierarchies (Geertz 2005)

[2] Potlatch is originally a North American custom, involving the distribution – and sometimes the destruction – of valuable items including blankets, described by Marcel Mauss in his seminal paper on the Gift (Mauss 1966). See also different forms of « potlatch" in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potlatch

[3] (https://www.etymonline.com/word/status)

connected to the meaning of our life, as Geertz puts it – based on his observations in Bali where cockfight is not only a game but also a source of prestige, "a matter of life and death":

"What, as we have already seen, the cockfight talks most forcibly about is status relationships, and what it says about them is that they are matters of life and death. That prestige is a profoundly serious business is apparent everywhere one looks in Bali – in the village, the family, the economy, the state. A peculiar fusion of Polynesian title ranks and Hindu castes, the hierarchy of pride is the moral backbone of the society. But only in the cockfight are the sentiments upon which that hierarchy rests revealed in their natural colors. Enveloped elsewhere in a haze of etiquette, a thick cloud of euphemism and ceremony, gesture and allusion, they are here expressed in only the thinnest disguise of an animal mask, a mask which in fact demonstrates them far more effectively than it conceals them. Jealousy is as much a part of Bali as poise, envy as grace, brutality as charm; but without the cockfight the Balinese would have a much less certain understanding of them, which is, presumably, why they value it so highly." (Geertz,2005)

It is quite certain that we have our own version of the, "Balinese cockfight" adapted to the disguises appropriate to our own cultural context, and Geertz's reading can help us understand the real meaning and measure the real importance of these practices – whether it is a competition or consumerist behaviour.

"Status" structures social relations

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist-anthropologist, believes social statuses and the fight to achieve and to keep them, structure our social space. Social space, therefore, is the synonym of social structure, a non-homogenous symbolic space, divided in specific fields and where individual competition takes place between actors who agree on the rules within the field. The market, education systems, art and politics are all social fields that are giving a chance

for individuals to compete for high status in pre-arranged manners. In this theory, social status is the function of accumulated capitals. This is not the capital of political economy derived from profit, but in this example, capital is used in a metaphoric sense. Bourdieu speaks about 4 types of capital: the economic, social, cultural and the fourth one, the result of all the other capitals, the symbolic. Of course, it is critical to keep in mind, these capitals are not independent from each other, but intertwined. If you are rich, you have better opportunities to go to a good school. This opportunity causes one to receive a better education and therefore, will have friends who are higher positioned in society. One can always turn to them, should one need to find a job or to send your own child to a good school. That is why social classes tend to be conservative and tend to reproduce themselves, keeping jealously their boundaries from unauthorized intruders.

According to Bourdieu, humans fight for domination just like primates but by more sophisticated means Humans are not looking to achieve physical strength but rather symbolic capital, which is much more than popularity, fortune or sophisticated style, although all of these

elements count together to determine a person's place in society. Unlike animals, humans can make their capitals hereditary, so a wealthy man's son has more chance to be rich himself. Probably this is the reason why baboons do not have social classes, humans have. This is the reason why   social mobility across generations is not a natural feature of societies, it tends not to happen, unless it is encouraged by a calculated social policy.

Cultural differences

Although the quest for high status is a key feature of human and primate societies, there are important differences in the way different cultural groups approach prestige – making status an important sensitive zone. There is cultural diversity in hierarchy and power: cultures differ in terms of the importance attributed to power differences, their acceptance, and the extent they give visibility to distinction. In fact, one of the main dimensions of cultural differences that Hofstede has identified. He calls it, "power distance[4]."

> *"This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of Power Distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low Power Distance, people strive to equalise the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power."*

Hofstede's main focus was the comparison of two national cultures: France and the Netherlands used to illustrate opposing orientations. The tendency towards horizontality by the Dutch can be seen for instance in the daily practice of the school headmaster to salute with a handshake every single student, and in the tendency of superiors and employees to have lunch together.

The tendency towards more verticality in France can be seen for instance in patterns of asymmetric addressing: a university professor can treat the student in an informal way while the student must treat the professor in the formal way. Also, subordinates are not encouraged to disagree openly with their superiors. What works for national cultures can also be found in other types of cultures: professional domains, musical or other subcultures, generations etc.

Changes and tensions

According to Margalit Cohen-Emerique, sensitive zones often emerge where older meanings and practices resist the change brought about by social progress. For example,with gender, new expectations towards gender equality and convergence are confronted with deep-rooted expectations towards a binary perception and differentiation of what feminine and masculine are (see our section on gender). We can now witness similar tensions in the conceptions and approaches to power and hierarchy. For example, a trend in rising expectations towards restraint in individual domination based on fear, threat and the affirmation that individual status should be the consequence of a person's social utility. At the same time, we see how individuals displaying aggressive, egocentric dominant behaviour - such as the former US president, Donald Trump, can be venerated. We witness contradictory tendencies: social justice movements fighting inequalities of group-based hierarchies, who seemingly receive more endorsements from members of dominant groups, while at the same time there is an unusual surge in extreme right-wing political movements, validating racist and xenophobic ideologies.

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[4] See the exploration of differences between national cultures on https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national-culture

There are suggested connections between the individual and the collective approach to hierarchy (i.e., the support of Donald Trump and the racist and xenophobic trend surges).

Typically, in the intercultural relation approaches to sensitive zones such as power relations are used in a similar way: members of societies see social progress in increasing horizontality and equality tend to project on other ('traditional') cultures the very patterns of inequality that are still present in their own cultures, but which they would like to transcend. Take for instance, the distinction of ascribed and achieved status. Ascribed status is connected to group memberships or to features that automatically position the person along the social hierarchy.

A person could be associated with higher status because he's a man rather than a woman, because he's older and wealthier. In contrast, achieved status is acquired by people, it is earned, based on their achievements. It is a common (mis)perception that in modern, industrial societies achieved status is the dominant model to gain power, while traditional societies[5] go by ascribed status (Andresen 2015) Indeed it would be naïve to think that in the modern Western countries only achievement counts, and that through achievement all pre-existing differences get levelled out: a bulk of research on different forms of discrimination witnesses the opposite. If achieved status were dominant, there would be more social mobility across social classes in modern Western capitalist societies. At the same time, it seems that some traditional or forager communities are much less driven by group hierarchization than western societies and exemplify better ideals than some of the western current ideals (Andresen 2015).

Of course, all these tensions between old and new expectations concerning power and hierarchy also penetrate the educational systems.How exactly this happens, we'll explore it in the last section of this chapter. Before that, we'll briefly explore the origins of hierarchies, introduce the two levels of hierarchization on the individual and group level.

The origins: where does hierarchy, domination come from?

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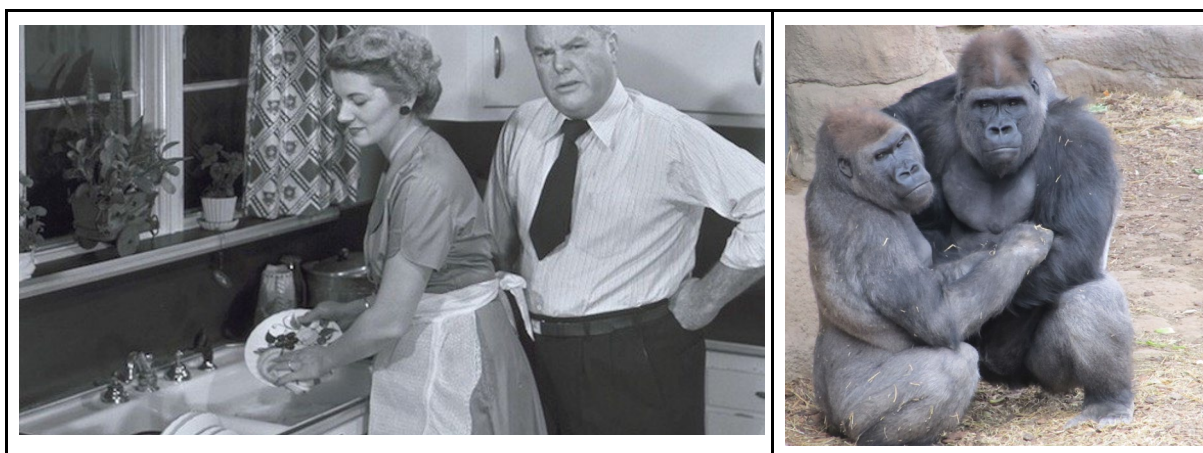
[5] A very large category referring to very different types of communities that are not industrial, urbanized, capitalist 'modern' societies

"The dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It's permanent. It's real. The dominance hierarchy is not capitalism. It's not communism, either, for that matter. It's not the military-industrial complex. It's not the patriarchy – that disposable, malleable, arbitrary cultural artefact. It's not even a human creation; not in the most profound sense. It is instead a near-eternal aspect of the environment, and much of what is blamed on these more ephemeral manifestations is a consequence of its unchanging existence. (…) Dominance hierarchies are older than trees. That part of our brain that keeps track of our position in the dominance hierarchy is therefore exceptionally ancient and fundamental" (Peterson, 2018:47)

Jordan Peterson is a polemic author and public speaker, but while disagreements may occur, we should not fully discard the evolutionary heritage in our patterns of relating to hierarchy. As Shkurko reminds us, dominance hierarchy is widely recognized as universal in the animal kingdom. Humans are part of that kingdom and culture did not lift us out of it completely. "Striving for high status and material well-being is rooted in human biology although it is culturally elaborated (Shkurko,2019)." This implies that regardless of the evolutionary foundations, our ways of approaching and using hierarchy sometimes may be quite different from our animal relatives and sometimes, surprisingly, they may be not that different. Let's have a look at two points of interest.

What is Forum Theatre?

Researchers differentiate dominance and status hierarchy, which are different, resulting from different behaviour patterns and based on different motivations ultimately resulting from different evolutionary pressures (Steckler, Tracy,204). Dominance hierarchy,or domination,is achieved through force, threat and intimidation. It is also referred to as fear-based status an is differentiated from *prestige*, which is respect-based status.

Domination is connected to the experience of a subjective sense of dominance, superiority, and power, "hubristic pride" = egotism, self-aggrandizement, sense of superiority, lack of empathy towards others (Steckler, Tracy, 204). Our recollections of animal documentaries may lead us to believe that domination is essentially animalistic and status is human. That would be quite erroneous: there may be several species where being the "alpha" is just about fighting competitors, but in others, individuals can become alpha through social efforts and alliances[6].

In human societies, status might also be linked to the capacity to work against dominance, rather than fighting for it. Societies with a preference for short "power distance" have little tolerance to inequality. Some of them have developed an arsenal of techniques to prevent their members from acquiring too much power. Pierre Clastres, a French anthropologist, who worked amongst South Americans, argue that small scale, stateless societies do not represent underdevelopment as compared to modern states, rather they have to be regarded as the illustration of an alternative - and diametrically opposing - solution to the same political

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[6] For an example see Frans de Waal's TED talk " The surprising science of alpha males 2017 "https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_the_surprising_science_of_alpha_males#t-139344

problem: that of power. Because they regard a strong hierarchy potentially destructive for the whole group, they keep it under check. They do not encourage their leaders to show force, to have a strong voice and to be determined. In fact, chiefs rule without coercion, because the society values prudential wisdom and calm guidance in its leaders.

Another "technique" for limiting hierarchy is the separation of material wealth and prestige. In many pre-modern social formations, it can be observed that prestige is linked to the voluntary renunciation of accumulation. That is the reason why an Amazonian hunter never participates in the distribution of his own prey and he is the last person to taste the food cooked from it. Although put on scene as a duel, even the custom of potlach (Mauss) can be considered as a means of keeping competition under check and to assure social mobility. The Kwakiutl chief can only preserve his status if he is showing generosity and renunciation to the point of destroying his own wealth. In case he finds a challenger, who proves to be better in these qualities he must give over his place. Polanyi (in the Great Transformation) affirms different principles go against humans' accumulating instinct. He shows reciprocity (the moving force behind the gift) and redistribution (the obligation to share) are the dominant forms of exchange in most pre-industrial societies. If Polanyi is right, then Bourdieu's theory on status might be less universally applicable than it seems at first sight. The systematic combination of economic, social and cultural capital to achieve high social status without the concomitant obligation to share might be the peculiarity of market societies rather than the general rule. Even the most determined free market societies have put in place some form of social protection opening the door (if only in principle) for social mobility, and allowing the reshuffling of the system of social hierarchy.

Individual vs group hierarchy
Individual hierarchy implies a differentiation based on personal characteristics: because a particular individual is stronger, bigger, or more competent he or she will acquire a higher rank in the social hierarchy. This is very different from group-based hierarchy, where the rank of the individuals is derived from their group membership in a socially constructed group such as race, religion, clan, tribe, lineage, linguistic,ethnic group, and/or social class (Pratto, Sidanius 1997:32). If complex, layered societies are distinctive to humans, building social stratification based on categories is not unique to people.

Mazur (2013:54) notes patterns as observable amongst primates as humans for allocating status by categories,"being an adult (vs. being juvenile), being male, and (among the higher primate species) having a high-ranked mother are all signs associated with high status, while their opposites suggest low status."

Indeed, age and sex seem to be reliable criteria for differentiation in the animal world. Each species has a reliable pattern of allocating the alpha position either to males or females. There are no species known with open competition going on in both sexes. In each species the young need to mature until they can compete for an alpha position. Interestingly, these are the two bases of differentiation that are also common in all human societies. Like with other animals, adults dominate the young. Unlike some animals, males tend to dominate females in all known human society[7]. Then around 10.000 years ago in agrarian societies new forms of group-based

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[7] At this point the reader may be tempted to look up historic and anthropological records of matriarchal societies. Most of the groups one may find will turn out to be matrilineal rather than an example of matriarchy, where the political power

hierarchies started to develop (Mazur, 2013:54). People learned to make categories and distinctions based on a whole new range of criteria, opening the way to the now,unfortunately,familiar classism,racism, and xenophobia, etc.

Individual and group-based hierarchies both affect us, but the second one may seem especially unfair: it completely disregards the features, skills, real contributions of individuals and reduces them to their group membership. In the following, we will treat these two forms of hierarchy separately, although, we will see they are not quite independent.

The desire for status

Our animal relatives are thought to be prisoners of their instincts, not benefiting from the luxury of freedom of will: to strive towards domination is a must, they cannot help it but compete and fight. We are a bit luckier and can negotiate our course of action considering the relevant social norms. But the motivation for status is there, and according to Anderson and his colleagues (2015) the desire for status is a fundamental, universally human motivation: status affects us beyond temporary mood swings, has long-term effects on well-being and happiness, it motivates a wide range of behaviour, it is an end goal (cannot be broken down to other goals) and can be observed across cultures[8].

Individual status seeking does not explain a desire for social stratification: ranking whole groups of people with respect to each other. But a need for a positive social identity does: Social Identity Theory for instance posits that people draw positive self-value from their group identities. Consequently, many people are motivated to create unequal distribution between their in-group and out group, then to go with an equal distribution diminishing the relative value of their group, and hence their own identity.

Individual Hierarchy

In the previous section we saw individuals are ranked in a hierarchy, some seem to have more importance and rights than others. We talked about two different ways of attaining rank: domination (based on force and intimidation) and status (based on prestige and respect). We intuitively understand how dominance can work –through sheer force or threat, but how is respect-based status distributed? Can people really acquire a high rank without being dominant? Mazur reminds us we spend our lives routinely participating in status interactions without facing open violence or threat (Mazur 2013:54) so how can this happen? How do some people benefit from the unforced deference by others? Why would they do it?

> « *Every individual has certain observable signs (or signals) that suggest his or her social status is (or ought to be) high or low. Some status signs are limited to a particular species, such as the silver hair on the back of a dominant male gorilla. Others are similar across primate species. For example, large size, physical strength,*

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should be in the hands of women rather than men. If such examples appear, they are extremely rare in the vast number of human cultures.

[8] The fact that there is a fundamental motivation for status does not imply that status necessarily brings wellbeing. As Nguyen and Peschard (2003) show that societies with higher rates of inequalities are doing worse in the individual wellbeing of their members – independently of their status in the status hierarchy.

vigor, good health, being an adult (vs. being juvenile), being male, and (among the higher primate species) having a high-ranked mother are all signs associated with high status, while their opposites suggest low status. For humans, wearing expensive and fashionable clothing is a signal of high status. A beautiful wife, desirable to other men… » (Mazur 2015)

Amongst the many status determinants listed above, some are individual features (the silver hair on the back of the gorilla, large size, etc). Some others are connected to group memberships (adult, male, etc.). In this section, we will consider the individual features, and the next session will look at group features. And since we are at "looks"…Mazur claims that status ranks are allocated in much similar ways across primate species (including humans). Could it be that physical traits count for human status ranks as well? If it is the silver hair on the back for the gorillas, what is it for us? Research has identified a wide array of physical cues for status, among them: voice pitch, facial appearance, body posture, physical attractiveness, and height[9] (Blaker, Van Vugt 2016:119).

If people read our status ranks from our looks, maybe we can influence this reading and cheat our way up the social ladder? People can display status symbols and try to "lead others to infer they have status by displaying status cues » through their choice of clothing, artifacts or behaviour (Leary et al 2016:159). Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption" (1899) describes the public demonstration of consuming food or any other products as a claim for status. This logic can apply to the potlatch practiced in British Columbia as well as to driving a Mercedes.

Today, we may be more familiar with the term "status symbol". Kim and Petit (2019) show how luxury brands and products have become in Eastern Asia the culturally appropriate way of signalling belonging to a high-status group. There are, however, fundamental differences between the potlatch and the Louis Vuitton bags in the closet: while the second consists in the accumulation of valuable object, the first consists in getting rid of them (once accumulated), throwing them off a cliff, destroying them, exhibiting the leader's wealth, and reaffirming his status. It is a marvel of human creativity how such seemingly opposite behaviour can converge in their aim. Status seeking is not just about objects either. It is in fact a complex set of behaviour, connecting looks, objects, and action.

"Leadership in Melanesia depends on personal achievement. Within every village, there is a competition between men who wish to become 'big men''; who aspire to make decisions on behalf of the village and wish to be respected and powerful. Such a status is acquired through the exchange of gifts with a large number of people, thereby creating ties of mutual obligation with as many persons as possible. A 'big man' should therefore have many relatives and several wives as a starting-point for his networking. When an established 'big man' dies, a new group of younger men will start competing to build similar positions." (Eriksen 1995:204)

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[9] A note on size : height can be connected to both dominance and prestige-based status, while muscularity is an indicator of dominance (Blaker, Van Vugt 2016: 131)

Whether it is looks, objects or actions, seeking status seems to be a competitive exercise: we seem to be competing for it against each other, as if it was a zero sum game. Contemporary approaches of individual status conferral connect status as perceived instrumental utility giving it a much more collaborative feel (see box below).

While this definition may have been formulated by contemporary modern Western researchers, it does not only apply to contemporary Western societies. Von Rueden looked at status determinants of small-scale societies such as hunter-gatherer or forager groups. These status determinants range from physical attributes to skills and social competences through material possessions (see box below). All three types of status determinants listed above are connected to the perceived social utility of the individual, they are resources that can be put to the service of the common goals – at least according to general perceptions.

Of course, the three types are not completely independent. For instance, gift-giving can be used to attract allies, just as embodied or material capital can, thus strengthening the relational capital of the would-be boss.

What is important to note is that the emphasis on "perceived social utility" for attributing social rank does not equal rational choice and objective assessment. We are still in the realm of preconceptions and perceptual biases. For instance, height is often associated with intelligence, IQ, and cognitive ability. This is a stereotype, which is as much biased as the idea that people of different skin colours will have different abilities. Yet, skin colour or race is also part of status beliefs. This leads us to the next section.

Group-Based Hierarchy

In ,"*Theory of Justice*" (1999) by John Rawls proposes an interesting thought experiment to check to what extent a society is socially just, i.e., not favouring any group over another: if we had the choice, would we be equally happy to be born into any identity group or social milieu? If the answer is negative, we can be pretty sure that there is some group-based stratification system that favours some groups over others in terms of access to rights, symbolic and material resources. Pratto and Sidanius, authors of the theory of social dominance observe a "basic human predisposition to form and maintain hierarchical and group-based systems of social organization". Their claim is none less than group-based stratification is a universal feature of human cultures, "beneath major and sometimes profound differences between different human societies, there is also a grammar of social power shared by all societies" (1999).

Contrary to individual ranks, group-based hierarchies do not appear at non-human primates, and only start to develop in agrarian societies about 10.000 years ago (Mazur, 2013:54). According to Pratto and Sidanius only two dimensions of group-based hierarchies are spread across all human societies: age and gender. These are observed even in small nomadic hunter-gatherer communities. Despite a great variety in the extent and form of this hierarchisation, there seems to be a reliable pattern: the adults dominate the young and males dominate females in all known societies.

Pratto and Sidanius argue that there is a third type of stratification, which is an arbitrarily set system, and which can use any socially constructed group as criteria for division: race, religion, clan, tribe, lineage, linguistic / ethnic group, or social class. This third type appears only whenever an economic surplus is produced by the community: this allows some males to specialise in the "arts of coercion" such as armies, police, bureaucracy (1999:35). This tendency does not only refer to modern capitalism, or a small portion of societies governed by exceptionally evil or greedy elites. The authors' conclusion is explicit: *"the apparently perfect correlation between the production of sustainable economic surplus and the emergence of arbitrary-set social hierarchy appears to imply that systems of arbitrary-set hierarchies will emerge whenever the proper economic conditions allow"* (1999:36).

The theory of Social Dominance offers an important connection between accounts of what seem to be a universal psychological tendency for the preference of one's own group and the social context. For manifestations of stereotypes, prejudice or racist attitudes are recurrently displayed by people of any belonging, regardless of their social rank. Social psychology has traditionally conceptualised these expressions as consequences of the preference of one's own group, of being rooted in one's culture (ethnocentrism) and of the symbolic need to defend this group. However, a great part of these expressions and all ideologies of group superiority and inferiority have as basic function to reinforce the prevailing group-based hierarchy (1999:38) and in this sense are intrinsically related to the dominance position of the perpetrators. So who would you perceive as more competent: a thirty year old black woman or the fifty year old white man? Of course, this is a trick question we should not know. What we do know is that the status beliefs of the majority will tend to include the White Man as a candidate for more "social utility".

Status and Hierarchy in the training room

What we see outside of the classroom, we see it also inside: both individual and group-based hierarchies influence the relational dynamics during the education experience. We first look at individual hierarchies and then at group-based hierarchy.

Status and Power of the Trainer / Facilitator

One of my first culture shock experiences after arriving in France happened at a PhD seminar. We were discussing issues surrounding intercultural education, when I noticed that the professor made a blatant mistake, and I told her. I held myself back noticing that no one gave any sign, even if I was quite certain they also noticed the confusion. I got curious, so I checked with several students whether they had also noticed the mistake. Some of them did, but none of them felt it appropriate to let her know. Adult education is less formal than school and higher education, yet still, the role of the facilitator and trainer is a special one. In contrast to learners the facilitator is usually paid, represents an institution that has the power over the participants in as much as she provides the programme. Whether or not this position of relative power or authority is recognized and legitimated by the learners, is a different question. In fact, we have quite many critical incidents brought by facilitators that illustrate what happens when the trainer loses her status.

> *"I was a trainer in a communication training, and I had a group of 6-7 young people (20-22 years of age) During the debriefing of the activities of the first session a participant declared: "The activities of the past training were just shit. Let's move on'!"*

> *"In a self-awareness training I proposed a frequently used personality questionnaire to the group. I asked the participants to fill out the test, to check what "type" they get, and to start a conversation in couples about their results. At this point it seemed that I lost the group – some of them did the activity but it was evident that they didn't care about it. One girl (let's call her Elizabeth), though, was especially resistant, she said: "People are way more complex than this, they can't be forced into any one category. I am already more advanced in self-awareness than this."*

The two incidents above highlight a tension between the instrumental status and the authority of the trainer. In both situations the trainers propose activities that are very badly evaluated by some of the participants, and therefore they lose their "instrumental social value" i.e., their status. What is interesting is that in this context, the status attached to the role does not protect the narrators from the harsh verbal feedback: there is no sign of concerns about face threats or respect, which in the first situation have protected a trainer even if she made a mistake. The following incident points even further to a change in paradigm:

> *"In the second morning of a training, where the day before there was some tension and heated debate around some concepts, I proposed to break from the planned agenda to get back to the polemic issues. I proposed to tackle three distinct issues, one at a time, and invited everybody to share their doubts and offer solutions. I felt the plenary dialogue quite open. However, in a next break a participant decided to leave the training, because I was too "vertical." (Paris, 2020)*

> *"I was facilitating a workshop about interculturality, using non formal pedagogy, relying on collaboration, joint discussion, games. I did not feel at all it was hierarchical. Yet in the middle of the session, one of the participants (from an activist organisation) told me he felt oppressed by me, as I was standing, and walking and he was sitting." (London 2019)*

In these situations, the trainers are criticised not because of an outdated theoretical model or activity, but for breaking with a participant's expectation to horizontality. In all four cases the formal prestige or status attached to a role loses importance. Status must be acquired and can be lost, and even relatively mild forms of verticality are seen as suspicious. And indeed, new

forms of organising the pedagogical experience are being proposed and tested, searching for the proper horizontality. This does not go without challenges either:

> *"I participated in a workshop on non-violent communication, organised on the principles of horizontality, and I found it exasperating that we had to make a round for each of us to express how we feel about the smallest detail. Even for starting the workshop with a round of sharing, we first had to go around to check how everyone would feel about it. The whole thing was excessively slow." (Paris, 2021)*

Independently of their preparation or individual predisposition towards horizontality or verticality, trainers are never only trainers. They also carry a whole set of identities, which can connect to the participants' status beliefs: age, gender, ethnicity, class, profession, etc.

Identities of the Trainer

The examples below show how participants' status beliefs concerning group identities influence the status of the trainer.

> *"I was training a multicultural group for about 5 months in Palermo, Sicily on intercultural awareness related to labour access for new-comers in Italy. During the first training sessions speaking about fears and expectation of their learning outcomes Mehmet was openly saying with a smile but still severe and aware about my possible reactions, that he doesn't trust and recognize a woman as an educator. He will listen to the training, but it will be difficult for him to accept and adopt what myself was going to teach them." (Palermo 2012)*

> *"I offer drawing workshops on Saturdays in a leisure centre, I am with a group of young Senegalese men who have known me for two years and some of whom have become friends. A young French man I know by sight, comes to the leisure centre. He's never been to the workshop before, and I guess he's coming for the coffee. I'm sitting at a table. He sits next to me, and puts his hand on my thigh, towards the inner side, under the table, so that no one can see him. That day, I have shorts with thin tights. I'm stunned and I don't dare say anything. This lasts a few seconds. I finally get up to end the scene and pretend that nothing happened." (Paris 2018)*

> *"In a training for youth workers, related to intimacy and relationship some participants expressed that because the trainers are apparently white heterosexual women, they should only be allowed to offer the training for white heterosexual women." (Paris, 2020)*

The first two situations are not uncommon when female youth workers work with young men whose reference frame gives priority to ascribed status and includes a hierarchy between genders favouring men over women. The young men's behaviour can be interpreted as status-seeking, compensating a status-threat, aiming at re-establishing a status hierarchy that the women were disrespecting through their professional role. In such situations, whether the professionals are competent in what they do is secondary, the reaction is triggered only by their categorisation as women.

Just as in the third situation it is the categorization of the facilitators in terms of colour, gender and sexual orientation it is the basis of the critique. Regardless of the limitations of the comment (a training only for heterosexual white women amounts to discrimination) it reflects two important concerns. First, the social identities of the facilitator are seen as elements of her competence: being a member of discriminated groups is supposed to grant her expertise and

capacity to understand the situation of others from the same group – or situations of oppression as such. Paradoxically, in this situation, the refusal to be seen in categories incites the participants to essentialise their own – and the trainer's - identities. Essentialization reduces identity to a single or very few categories. It might be objected that membership is not a full guarantee for specific experiences, and experience is not a guarantee for expertise. Yet it does imply authenticity in dealing with the subjects. In intercultural training demand respect for essential ideas might cause a serious threat to trainers, as the intercultural approach is based on the belief that communication between different social identities is not only possible but also desirable. However, organising "non mixed groups" at least for some sessions might be an important pedagogical tool, as it allows people who face similar oppressions to collectivise their experiences without being blamed or judged for them by members of majority. This leads us to the question of group-based hierarchies.

Group-Based Hierarchies: Status and Stigma amongst Learners

Most adult educators have assimilated a desire of inclusion, equality, and political correctness that they strive to implant in their education activities. But such an attitude does not rid us of automatically from our preconceptions (for example a binary view of gender) as the example below highlights:

"When dealing with the issue of gender differences, during the debriefing of an exercise, I proposed the division of the group into males and females and a female student challenged me saying that neither of the two genders represented her and that she asked for the inclusion of a third group called 'queer'." (Bergamo 2015)

Also, good intentions do not imply that we possess the knowledge and methodology to implement these appropriately. Sometimes the desires for inclusion backfire.

« In 2008 I taught theatre in a workshop for adults in Palermo. During the first lesson I met my students, among them there was Maria, a woman in a wheelchair. I prepared various ice breaking and team building activities but at the beginning of the lesson I got into a panic because all the activities that I had prepared were in a standing position and Maria would not be able to participate. The following lessons were terrible because I only gave my students activities in which they had to sit in order to let Maria participate in the activities. I didn't understand that this methodology caused discomfort in all participants and in particular in Maria. I was convinced that remaining seated was the only solution to work together but I didn't understand that I was emphasizing Maria's disability and I was creating a barrier in the creation of the team ». (2008, Palermo)

In fact, the unreflected good intentions may have negative consequences. Studies of status gaps in interracial contexts in the US show, that egalitarian White people interested in developing relations with members of minorities are often unable to understand them and engage in "patronizing self-presentation, to appear warmer, despite endorsing socially liberal ideologies" (Fiske 2017). The attitude reinforces the perception of status hierarchy, just as the attempt to integrate Maria in the example above. What's more, we can never be certain of when our preconceptions and biases influence us. It is safe to assume that in some form they are always with us: they are part of the frame of references through which we observe and interpret the world around us. They can be there when we estimate that creating "non mixed groups", for some discussion is not relevant, in the language we use, in our capacity to envisage how structural inequalities can affect one domain or another.

Furthermore, educators are not only expected to change their own views and attitudes, but they also need to adjust to the differing attitudes and expectations of their participants. The special difficulty here is that unlike a simple difference in opinion or view, differences in the perceptions and adjustments to inequalities are directly connected to questions of identity, dignity, and recognition.

> *"It was a training for youth workers, related to intimacy and relationship. A heated debate exploded on whether postcolonialism and systemic oppressions should be explicitly addressed in such a training. Someone else expressed she does not understand why we need to spend so much time with oppressions and discrimination instead of focusing on the subject of intimacy." (Paris, 2020)*

In the situation above, all parties were under some form of identity threat. Members of minorities felt disrespected because their specific experiences were not recognized: the activities proposed did not explicitly tackle for instance how experiencing intimacy may be different according to memberships in specific groups. Some members of majority experienced identity threat when they were treated as insensitive for not being properly attentive to the minorities, diminishing the relevance of the impact of low-status social identities for questions of intimacy and relationships. And of course, the facilitators had their identity threat for not being able to appropriately mediate between the participants. Such competences of mediation are likely to become a key competence for conflicts around power and hierarchy. Recognition should not be a zero sum game where the recognition of some can only happen sacrificing the dignity of others.

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