

The Unscripted

Series

Topic:
Power

About

There are scripts running all the time in our communities that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. There is power in these scripts and when they come together, they organize how we collectively think about and see the world. This is what some scholars call ideological systems. Although ideologies are invisible and aren't easily attributed to any one person – they aren't neutral. Ideologies are powerful forces that create, maintain and advance our social institutions (E.g. Education systems, economic systems, criminal justice systems, etc.). These social systems exercise power through a system that rewards and punishes individuals and groups according to what the system determines to be acceptable or unacceptable. In the sections below, we hope to help you critically reflect on power and ask questions like, "How is power consolidated and colonized in our thoughts and beliefs?"; "How is power systematically deployed through our social systems to either empower (humanize) or oppress (dehumanize) individuals and groups?" We know that we will only scratch the surface, but if we can help you become a little more conscious of how power works we will have taken a significant step toward dismantling racism that operates in oppressive scripts that shape our lives today.

What?

It's not easy to define "power". Perhaps that's because it is an abstract term that points us toward how invisible ideas, convictions and beliefs become animated in our society. Discussions about power are perhaps most effective when the theory meets practice. To get started, let's first conceptually explore power as it takes the form of an idea and then becomes deployed widely through social systems and structures. For instance, consider power as a catalyst for the cultural invention of "race". It's important to recognize that "race" is a label that, at its core, is an idea. As a construct, race artificially groups different ethnic groups together. But systematically labeling people isn't a neutral exercise. It is an expression of power. Stereotyping turns unique individuals (who are subjects) into anonymous racial categories (or objects). This objectification is dehumanizing and can become particularly insidious when deployed through large systems. In the next section, we will explore a concrete example of how power is abused when the government uses race to create policies that systematically oppress the Black community while simultaneously advancing the economic interests and social control for White majorities.

So What?

Throughout the history of the United States, White majorities have used their power to create, maintain and perpetuate systems that oppress other minority groups in order to advance their own economic interests and maintain social control. For instance, immediately after the 13th Amendment was ratified in December of 1865 to abolish slavery, Jim Crow laws began to take root in the form of Black codes. These codes functioned as local and state laws that effectively maintained the status quo of segregation and subjugation of Black individuals and communities. Black codes strictly detailed when, where and how formerly enslaved people could work, and for how much compensation. They appeared throughout the South as a powerful legal system of control that systematically placed Black citizens into indentured servitude, taking away voting rights, controlling where they lived, how they traveled and even enabling the seizure of children for labor. White power was consolidated within the legal system as former Confederate soldiers worked as police officers and judges. Black codes also worked in conjunction with labor camps for the incarcerated, where prisoners were legally treated as enslaved people. Jim Crow laws could be considered an obvious example of how consolidated power can be used to oppress others, however, power doesn't only reside in systems or with majority groups. Individuals and vulnerable groups have power too. When we carefully attend to how power is expressed in language and behaviors we can see a variety of different forms it can take. Adults only need to spend a few hours with children to learn this lesson. It is certainly a humbling experience to watch how powerful and savvy kids can be when they want something you don't want them to have. Whether it is a persisting cry, devastating look of disappointment, or just persistent badgering that inevitably wears you down – kids have power and they know how to use it. Power can take many different forms not all of which oppressively dehumanize us. Emancipatory power animates and liberates us to become more aware of our agency and how we can affect change. As you continue in your journey to critically explore how power works, don't miss the practical ways you can empower and dignify others – especially those who are most vulnerable and marginalized in our society.

Now What?

As you reflect on power here are some additional resources for consideration:

For discussion:

- Jim Crow laws <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>
- Documentary Film 13th (Ava DuVernay) – Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/title/80091741>
- Online article: 75 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice <https://medium.com/equality-includes-you/what-white-people-can-do-for-racial-justice-f2d18b0e0234>
- Take an online implicit bias test <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- The Culture of Whiteness by James Mulholland <https://notatomywhiteself.wordpress.com/2018/05/06/the-culture-of-whiteness/>
- Social Power: Definition and Concept. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/social-power-definition-lesson-quiz.html>
- French and Raven's Five Forms of Power: Understanding Where Power Comes From in the Workplace https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_56.htm