

THE WISDOM OF THREE THOUSAND LIVES: DYSFUNCTIONAL POWER AND A NEW PARADIGM FOR TRUE EMPOWERMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Whether it manifests as dysthymia, personality disorders, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse or other symptoms, dysfunctional power practices seem to be at the core of many people's difficulties in creating the lives they want. As a therapist for over 25 years and a clinical supervisor for over 20 years, I have had the amazing honor of being involved in the treatment of more than three thousand individuals. Among these widely diverse people, ineffective attempts to be powerful have emerged as a nearly universal difficulty. Any difficulty so common cannot really be called pathological. I found myself wondering what forces were at work to create this nearly universal problem with power.

My quest to understand the difficulties with power I saw in these 3,000 and more lives led me to more and more fundamental aspects of the human psyche. Through two of my specializations--work with trauma survivors and with convicted violence offenders--I saw pronounced, severe examples of passivity and aggression. This dual lens brought into full 3D vision the disturbingly pervasive dominance-power paradigm underlying most human interactions. I also saw how obviously and completely ineffectual such dominance-based power practices were and how even the passive were attempting to be powerful in a way. People were trying the same strategies over and over again, to similar ineffectual end. It puzzled me how so many did not self-adjust when their actions did not lead to the outcomes for which they longed. They continued the same ineffective dysfunctional practices, sometimes with even more vigor. Eventually I could see that of course I also did this in certain areas of my life and that indeed everyone I knew anything about did as well.

I recall how disturbing it was to realize that there is no such thing as effective power in the reigning power mindset, which I call the Dominance Paradigm. If there is no way to "win," I thought, how can we be healthy? Then the answer occurred to me: Don't accept the paradigm. From there I began to look for the essential components for building a paradigm for true power -- power practices that lead to effective outcomes. Such a paradigm, I knew, would have to offer power practices that would be effective even when others were using dominance-based "power".

Fortunately, I did not have to build the new paradigm from scratch. Many others—throughout recorded history, in fact—have struggled with some portion or another of these issues. I also found much commonality among the ideas of people who have struggled with these issues. When virtually identical insights are discovered in literature from fields as different as evolution and political movements, primatology and spiritual teachings, psychoneurophysiology and theories of economy, such insights likely make solid building blocks. The RAR=E Paradigm described in this paper, with its true empowerment practices, are built from these blocks and from the wisdom of 3,000 lives.

THE THREAT RESPONSE

From reading the wide-ranging literature and learning from these 3,000 lives, I have drawn the conclusion that our unique human neurology has given us built-in responses to threat that are extremely vulnerable to distortions and dysfunctional power practices. Furthermore, those specific vulnerabilities to distortion and dysfunction appear to be at the heart of the most common of our psychological and relational problems. As such, developing *functional* power practices and tools for managing our vulnerability to distortion will have far-reaching positive effects.

To understand our vulnerability to distortions and dysfunctional power, then, we need to understand the human brain. The human brain is considered to have three evolutionary layers: the reptilian brain, the mammalian brain and the neocortex.¹ Each of these makes its own contribution to our dysfunctional power practices. Their interaction creates even more problems.

REPTILIAN BRAIN POWER DYSFUNCTIONS

Humans share a “Threat Response program” that is extremely similar among vertebrates all the way down the phylogenetic tree to reptiles. This Threat Response is mediated by the reptilian brain, which is the most evolutionarily primitive part of the human brain.

Imagine you are leaving a building and as you walk away, you see a mountain lion about twenty feet from you, crouched and tense, with that predator’s look in its eye. What happens in your body? Your muscles constrict—some feel it most in their legs, some in their shoulders and upper arms, some in their upper backs. Your digestive system reacts—some feel a constriction in their stomachs, some feel it in their bowels. Your heart and lungs react—most people are aware of increased heart beat or a pounding pulse; some are also aware of a shift to “chest breathing” rather than “belly breathing.” These are all aspects of the Threat Response program. These bodily changes are all ways in which the body prepares for the three possible defensive behavioral responses to a threat: fight, run, or freeze (fight, flight or fright response).

In addition, during the Threat Response program in humans, thinking processes change. Many describe a narrowing of thought focus, intense awareness of threat-relevant sensory stimuli, rapid threat assessment thoughts, and a sense that time has slowed down. The thoughts people report having during an immediate intense threat are along the lines of, “What can I use as a weapon? I wonder if I can outrun it if I go that way? Oh no, it’s coming closer! I have to make a decision! What should I do?” Alternatively, some report no real thoughts at all but rather “pre-thoughts” that amount to scanning and acting without a sense of having deliberated or made a decision. What we usually *don’t* think about in this situation is how beautiful mountain lions are, or how glad we are that they haven’t all been killed off--even if those are opinions we usually do hold. Attention is on the mountain lion as the threat, with all our thinking and body resources focused on how to “win” this battle.

Another part of the Threat Response program has to do with situations when “losing” the battle becomes inevitable. I call it the “Shutdown” response. I have seen video in nature films that

¹ For example: MacLean, P. D. (1973). *A Triune Concept of Brain and Behavior*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto.

illustrates this Shutdown response.² In one such film, a cougar is chasing a deer. The deer is clearly in the Threat Response, first freezing and then running. When the cougar gets very close and is about to sink its claws and teeth into the deer, the deer collapses but is not dead or passed out; its eyes are open but glazed over. The camera stays on the deer while the cougar is frightened off by the filmmakers. The deer stays down. It remains conscious. Its muscle tone is slack, eyes still glazed. After a few minutes, the deer's ears perk up and rotate. Assured the cougar is not present now, its eyes clear and without moving in any other way, it appears to visually check the surrounding area. Then, the deer takes several deep shuddering breaths, jumps to its feet and goes running off in giant leaps and bounds. This Shutdown response exists in humans as well—in severe cases we call it “shock” (physical shutdown) or “dissociation” (psychological shutdown). It is apparently a mechanism for not having to consciously experience helplessness, intense pain, fear or overwhelm. The Shutdown program includes a process for coming out of Shutdown when the threat has passed, which functions to reset the neurological system to a non-threat mode by activating the parasympathetic nervous system.

Clearly, evolutionarily speaking, having a hard-wired Threat Response, with both Defensive and Shutdown mechanisms must have created a survival advantage at some stage. But when, in a human's life experiences, would any of the hard-wired reptilian Defensive or Shutdown Threat Responses be the *best* response, the most effective response? In our example of the mountain lion, the reptilian Threat Response program offers fighting, running, freezing, or shutdown. But our experts on wildlife mention none of those as the most effective response to a mountain lion or cougar encounter. They tell us we should make ourselves look as big as possible, and without crouching, slowly back away leaving the mountain lion an open path out.³ They go on to say that running—one of our hard-wired Defensive Threat Response behaviors—would be the worst thing to do because a cat of any type will chase what runs. Most of us don't run as fast or as agilely as mountain lions can. Thus, even in the case of potentially life-threatening encounters with wild animals, this reptilian-brain Threat Response program would not serve us well.

What about with dangerous humans? If a human is threatening our physical safety, would the reptilian Threat Response program serve us well? Most self-defense experts will tell you that good self-defense is mostly mental—that is, that the goal is to recognize potential danger and avoid it before an encounter even occurs. But even when the threat is already present, the reptilian Threat Response program is not the best option. For example, in hostage situations, Homeland Security's advice even to US Marines is: “[D]o not make eye contact with the captors initially. Be polite and cooperate. You may need to reassure your abductors that you are not trying to escape by controlling your emotions, following instructions, and avoiding physical resistance.”⁴ Thus, it would appear that our reptilian Threat Response program isn't the best we can do as humans even when in a physically threatening situation with another human.

With perceived threats that do not put our lives at risk, the reptilian Threat Response program is even less useful. For example, in any type of relationship conflict, whether with a family member,

² I viewed these films as part of a training workshop for Somatic Experiencing—a trauma recovery treatment founded by Peter Levine. However, I have drawn slightly different conclusions about the Threat Response than did Peter Levine, mostly regarding distinguishing “shutdown” from “freezing”.

³ For example: <http://wildlife.state.co.us/wildlifespecies/livewithwildlife/mammals/lioncountry1.htm>

⁴ For example: US Marine Corps (9/18/2001). *The Individual's Guide for Understanding and Surviving Terrorism*.

romantic partner, friend, coworker or boss, the Threat Response repertoire of fighting, running, freezing or shutting down clearly are not helpful. Fighting will escalate any conflict. We can run away but the conflict will still be there when we stop avoiding. We can freeze but nothing changes. We can shutdown but things likely get worse. Therefore, in any relationship situation, the reptilian Threat Response program will not be effective in creating the change we want. However, our reptilian hardwiring will lead us to dysfunctional efforts to be powerful in these situations, unless we make conscious choices to do things differently.

MAMMALIAN-BRAIN THREATS

The next evolutionary layer of human neurology is the mammalian brain. The mammalian brain mediates our ability to mate, to bear and raise children, and to live in groups (among other functions). The mammalian brain functions also present corresponding new “threats,” such as mate jealousy, offspring protection, and status challenges. These threats *feel* like survival threats. In extreme circumstances, they can be threats to survival, though mostly they are threats to *genetic* survival not personal survival. The reptilian Threat Response program is “designed” for immediate physical threats to personal survival. However, a mammalian “threat” will frequently mistrigger the reptilian Threat Responses, at least to some degree. Humans’ responses to mate jealousy, status challenges and offspring protection threats appear very similar to the reptilian Threat Responses. We use fight aggression, running, freezing and shutting down in these situations too. Once again, fighting, running, freezing and shutdown are not the most effective, powerful responses in those situations.

Placating. In addition to adding new threat possibilities, the mammalian brain also adds another possibility to the Threat Response repertoire. I call it the placating response; it is also known as the “tend and befriend” or affiliative response. The placating response to threat appears to be “soft-wired” as part of the social engagement system.⁵ When an attachment figure becomes more frightening, females in particular tend to approach the frightening attachment figure with affiliative behaviors rather than with fighting, running or freezing responses. In my work with domestic violence, I saw this pattern repeatedly among the children and partners of violent men: The previously violent man starts to get tense and his partner and children say or do soothing things. While this response might have increased safety in the immediate situation, it was not the most empowered choice for the women and children in the longer term and did not reduce their threat of violence from the men beyond the immediate moments.

NEOCORTEX “THREATS”

Our fancy human brains have a third evolutionary layer—the neocortex. The neocortex is a learning brain. It makes associations and generalizations. It is capable (at least in the higher

⁵ Especially see:

Taylor, S. (2006). Tend and befriend: Biobehavioral bases of affiliation under stress. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 273-277.

Porges, S. (2003). Social engagement and attachment: A phylogenetic perspective. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 108(1), 31-47.

David, D. & Lyons-Ruth, K. (2005). Differential attachment responses of male and female infants to frightening maternal behavior: Tend or befriend versus fight or flight? *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 26(1), 1-18.

primates) of symbolism and abstraction. It comprehends the concepts of future and past. These capabilities are clearly very advantageous in many circumstances. However, these capabilities also create nearly endless “threat” possibilities—albeit none of them truly physically threatening. We humans can feel threatened by something we think of, by an idea mentioned by someone else, by an image on a screen, by the unknown future, by our own insignificance in the big universe, by things that happened in the past, even by the threat of a threat. All of these perceived threats can activate our reptilian or mammalian Threat Response programs, yet none of these situations are effectively dealt with through fighting, running, freezing, shutting down, or placating. It’s pretty tough to do combat with a test or job demand; it’s impossible to run to avoid the future; the past cannot be placated. But our mistriggered reptilian or mammalian Threat Responses will compel us to try—unless we use conscious volition to override these programs.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE INEFFECTIVE THREAT RESPONSES

One question arises in all of this: Although we can understand how these dysfunctional responses arise, why do we humans so universally continue them despite their ineffective outcomes? Behavior theory tells us that ineffective responses extinguish after a time of non-reinforcement. Therefore, something must be reinforcing these responses despite their apparent lack of effectiveness.

The simple answer to the persistence of two of the defensive reptilian Threat Responses--fighting and running--with their consistently poor outcomes, is the fact that engaging in them is gratifying. It feels good to hit someone who has frightened us—or to watch Jack Bauer beat up the terrorist. It feels good to successfully escape from someone or something that feels threatening. This gratified good feeling becomes confused with power or effectiveness—and we keep doing what feels good, but doesn’t work.

A man feels jealous and worried about his ability to maintain his relationship with his partner, fearful she will leave him for another. So he becomes controlling and angry and punishes her for any perceived disloyalty. These actions feel good to him and he might even believe he is in control. But the real effect he’s had is to destroy trust and make being with him so unpleasant that now she actively does want out of the relationship, whether she ever considered it before or not. A more effective response when he felt jealous and insecure would have been to discuss his feelings with his partner and seek some shared understanding that might have given him cause to trust more. Alternatively, if his fears turned out to be warranted, he needed to determine whether he wanted to invest more to improve the relationship or invest less given what it was.

A college student, who has come to believe that her worth is in her grades and the length of her resume, takes on too many courses and extracurricular activities. When the stress becomes too much, as it inevitably will, she “fights” her way through the fatigue to get her A’s because “fighting” feels better than “giving up”. Before long, however, she becomes less and less able to perform. But she keeps “fighting” and eventually fails. A more effective path would have been to acknowledge she had overextended herself and make adjustments while also reworking her sense of what makes her worthy.

The answer to the persistence of the shutdown and placating responses despite their ineffective outcomes is that they are reinforced by the fairly immediate reduction of tension in the situation. Numbing out means you don’t *feel* as distressed as you were even if the situation is not improved.

Placating, to the extent that it reduces the agitation of the possible aggressor, *feels* effective and may even be effective for the immediate moments. So the short-sighted “solution” is reinforced at the expense of more effective actions.

A man hates his job but spent many years in college to have this career and is in serious debt, with a partner and children who have come to expect the lifestyle that comes with the income the job brings. Every morning he feels how much he hates his job and doesn't want to go into work. He notices one day that taking the Vicodin prescribed for minor oral surgery gives him some escape from this feeling. He doesn't have to be aware of how distressing his life has become. But shutting down his feelings isn't a precise endeavor. When he is numb to work distress, he is also numb to everything else in his life. He becomes more and more removed from his relationships with his partner and children. To manage the new level of distress this brings, he takes more Vicodin, or spends more time surfing the internet. In the immediate sense, he is escaping his distress and that feels better. But each escape removes more and more of his life from him. A more effective and powerful path would have been to take his own initial distress seriously, as a signal that his life wasn't working for him, to begin to communicate his distress to his partner, explore possibilities for change and prepare for those that could lead to the life he now knows he really wants for himself. The pain and effort of having to make these changes would be manageable whereas the pain and effort of pulling out of an addiction and repairing deeply neglected relationships would likely be exponentially more difficult.

The woman whose partner has been violent before sees him getting tense. She offers to massage his back to help reduce his stress, makes his favorite meal, and tells him she will put the kids to bed so he can just relax. Sometimes this reduces his tension and the evening goes on smoothly enough. But the same behaviors that placate him also create a dynamic between them that sets her up as the one managing his emotional and mental state and sets her up as subservient to him. This dynamic contributes to a higher likelihood that he will act out aggressively in the future. A more effective path would be for her to address what it is like for her when he gets tense and ask him to manage himself and learn skills to communicate effectively, to set and enforce boundaries about mistreatment and possibly to leave the relationship if he is not reliable in refraining from violence.

We can see the appeal of the Threat Response choices, but such short-sighted gratification of ineffectual responses and the impulse to reduce immediate distress at the cost of long-term effective action is at the core of a great many problems with which clients present for treatment. These are all dysfunctions of power—people trying to have power over something distressing in their lives but making misguided choices over and over again, which arise from and are maintained by primitive aspects of neuropsychology.

ANOTHER MAMMALIAN-BRAIN CONTRIBUTION: PRIVILEGE HIERARCHIES

We have yet another set of difficulties contributing to dysfunctional power that appears to arise from mammalian brain functions. To illustrate this, imagine you live in an ancient society and you have had an amazing harvest. You've got a lot of extra food. Who do you give the extra food to? Most people will start off saying, “to the most needy.” But then I say, “There are a lot of needy and only enough extra for some”—how do you decide which ones of the needy you'll give your surplus to? Do you give it to your sister or a distant cousin three villages over? Let's say you've taken care of your own immediate family—who gets some next? Your childhood friend and her 2 children or that family three villages over with the 8 children? Let's say you've taken care of your village but

there's still a little left over—do you give it to that other tribe with their funny ways, who usually eat different food anyway? Or do you give it to that distant village that is in your tribe and has similar ways?

The point of this exercise is to illustrate what appears to be a universal tendency to create “privilege hierarchies.” We find it very easy to develop what I call circles of care—people for whom we feel an obligation to give care and, by implication, those for whom we don’t. We humans (and other mammals) quite readily form perceptions of an “Us” group and a “Them” group. These groups are usually based on genetic ties, sometimes signaled by those who look and act more like us. Our Us group will receive extra help and resources from us just because they are in our group--they don’t have to do anything to earn it. This is a privilege hierarchy.

“Privilege” is defined here as “increased access to resources which is unearned and for which one is not held accountable.” In other words, I give you some of my surplus just because you’re in my “Us” group and I don’t ask you any questions about what you do with it—it is yours to do with as you please. No moral standards are placed on you. If I gave it to you, you can eat it all yourself, you can share with your best friend, you can use it to bargain for something else you want, whatever you please. Once a particular group controls the access to resources needed for survival, we have a group identity-based privilege hierarchy.

In the U.S., the statuses that are over-privileged are easy to see when we consider what types of people are likely to hold the highest positions of power. Generally speaking, in the U.S., being male, white, wealthy, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, married, “attractive”, in “prime adult” years (generally 25-55), U.S. born, and having English as your first language infer privilege. The under-privileged include: women, people of color, poor, non-Christian, those with disabilities, LGBT individuals, nonmarried, “unattractive”, the young or the elderly, immigrants, and those whose first language was not English. (Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States shows us our privilege hierarchy is loosening somewhat. On the other hand, though he is underprivileged in racial/ethnic status, Obama held privilege in other ways. Also, in my opinion, he exercises some of the functional power practices I promote in this article, and functional power practices do immunize one against privilege-based power dynamics, as I will discuss in later sections.)

Clearly we all hold various statuses—some that carry privilege and some that do not. Each interaction with another is imbued with very specific privilege-based power dynamics. Each of us is affected by these privilege dynamics and each of us is vulnerable to the dysfunctional power practices that come with the privileged or underprivileged position. I address dysfunctional power practices that come with privilege-based dynamics in the next section.

THE DOMINANCE PARADIGM

Although privilege hierarchies are ugly, they are not, by themselves, the major problem in terms of dysfunctional power. It is when they are combined with the aggression Threat Response that the most damage occurs. As a person with a stockpile of extra food, what do you do when someone wants the food but he or she isn’t someone to whom you want to give it? Someone might try to sneak in and take some or bust through your guards and take some by force--what might you do to protect your surplus? Generally, the tactics used in such a situation include various forms of direct physical, verbal or coercive manipulation aggression. Aggression added to privilege hierarchies creates the Dominance Paradigm.

The Dominance Paradigm is inherently and fundamentally dysfunctional and yet it is the reigning power paradigm—probably of all time and nearly all cultures. We can see the natural forces at work in our neurophysiology that gave rise to it and even what sustains it. But the Dominance Paradigm is ineffective and quite damaging for all, so we need an alternative. Our alternative will come from a deep understanding of the Dominance Paradigm and then developing power practices that are antithetical to those of the Dominance Paradigm.

To understand what I mean by the dysfunctional power practices of the Dominance Paradigm, we need to look more deeply into what it means to hold a particular status as overprivileged or underprivileged. Consider the statuses you hold that place you in the privileged group—which I will now call the Dominant group. What is life like for the wealthy white man for example? In workshops, when I ask this question, people respond with comments like these: “Life is easier on top,” “Things go your way,” “You don’t have to worry where your next meal is coming from,” “People treat you like you are important.” Then they will think a little more and say, “lonely,” “competitive,” “arrogant,” “not trusting because you don’t know who is after what you’ve got,” “kind of paranoid because you don’t know for sure what anyone’s motives are,” “not very aware of how you really impact people because few people are really going to tell you the truth,” and others.

Now consider the statuses you hold that would lead to underprivilege in U.S. culture--what I will now call the Oppressed group. What is life like from the Oppressed perspective? Workshop participants answer with comments like these: “Life is hard,” “You have to work harder than other people for the same things,” “Nothing comes easy,” “You learn to pull together with others in your group,” “It’s scary and depressing,” “It’s unfair.”

If we go on to consider what tactics and strategies people use to get their needs met in the Dominance Paradigm, we see tactics of aggression used to keep the Dominant status. The aggression might be direct, such as a highly privileged nation waging war on another nation that isn’t cooperating with the wishes of the privileged nation, or a husband/father using violence to gain compliance from his wife and children. The aggression might be coercive manipulation, such as a company’s leaders using workers’ need to earn money to survive as leverage to get them to accept dangerous working conditions in a town with few jobs; or, coercive manipulation as it shows up in the husband who won’t give money for groceries to the mother of his children unless she has sex with him that morning when she has already told him she doesn’t want to.

If we look at the strategies of Oppressed people for dealing with this state of things, we might see direct aggression rebellion. The teenager yells back or hits back when the parent attempts to use aggression to maintain dominance. The workers in the company riot in protest of their exploitation and attack managers. The underprivileged nation engages in terrorism against the privileged nation. In other cases, we see indirect rebellion in a variety of manifestations. The dominated teenager becomes a very good liar, avoiding challenge by telling his parents what they want to hear and behaving inauthentically with them. The exploited workers help each other steal from the plant or manipulate the time clock so they get paid for hours they don’t work. The underprivileged nation publicly befriends the overprivileged nation while working behind the scenes to undermine their economy.

The most common indirect rebellion strategy could generically be called “passing.” In this strategy, the Oppressed changes his or her appearance in various ways to look more like the Dominant as a way to gain access to resources. If white people get the job more frequently than people of color, a person of color might try to look, speak, and act as much like white people as possible when

applying. If men usually get the promotion, a woman might try to dress and act as much like a man as possible. If the prime-years adults usually get the promotion, a candidate might dye the gray out of her hair. If the U.S. is the most privileged nation, another nation might mimic the U.S. as much as possible to avoid aggression and receive favor.

In still other cases with the Oppressed, we see submission as a strategy for getting needs met. If I believe that the natural order of things is that men should dominate women, then I might try to play my feminine role, as defined by the men in my life, as best as I can. If I believe U.S. Americans rightfully earned its powerful place in the world, as the leader of another country, I might yield to exploitive demands and in other ways work to serve the interest of the U.S. If I believe parents know best and have complete rights to raise their children as they wish, as a teenager of dominating parents, I might live by their rules until I become a self-supporting adult, and possibly continue even past adulthood to submit to their will. If I am a worker who believes the owners of the company are rightfully superior to me, I might offer my labor as a commodity to be valued at whatever the owners choose and accept that wage without protest, while maintaining company loyalty.

Finally, another strategy common among the Oppressed is avoidance. If I can't fight the Dominant and win, if I can't pass or otherwise find a way to manipulate the Dominant, if I have no commodity valuable enough to the Dominant group, I might find it difficult to get my needs met and to cope. I might find it most manageable not to be aware of my plight. So I might engage in various methods to stay unaware or tune out. I might try to remove myself as much as possible, through isolating geographically or withdrawing interpersonally. I might even use alcohol, drugs, food or gambling to be less aware and numb.

All these strategies—the aggression, both direct and indirect, of the Dominant and the Oppressed, the submission and the avoidance of the Oppressed--correspond to the repertoire of the reptilian and mammalian Threat Responses. The strategies of both the Dominant and the Oppressed who operate within the Dominance Paradigm are parallel to fighting, running, freezing, shutting down, or placating. Just as with the Threat Response programs, these strategies for living in the Dominance Paradigm are ineffective attempts to be powerful. In actuality, these strategies all *maintain* the Dominance Paradigm and they all lead to psychological symptoms and interpersonal dysfunction. They do not apply to every individual (some discover functional power practices) but they do appear to be extremely common. These very common symptoms and interpersonal dysfunctions are described next.

The Dominant tend to be self-centered in terms of thinking themselves more important, but also are other-focused in other ways. They tend to believe the Oppressed are inferior to them. They see the Oppressed as the source of their troubles and the source of their fix. The Dominant become mistrusting, which renders truly intimate connections with others very difficult. Without intimate connections, their lives feel empty and lose meaning. The Dominant's privileged statuses also lead to a failure of accurate perception of cause and effect. When others provide us with unearned access to resources; when others provide inauthentic "grooming and soothing" of our psyches and moods; when others clean up our messes such that we never even know we made them--cause and effect get distorted. Things stop adding up correctly; one and one do not equal two. When we are using aggression in our Dominance, we can even become bullies that feel like victims. We might truly not understand why those we have mistreated don't like us or trust us.

The Oppressed also tend to have inaccurate self-regard, many coming to believe they must be inferior after receiving such messages so many times. Just as often, the Oppressed think badly of the Dominant. They too are other-focused, seeing the Dominant as the source of their troubles and the source of their fix. The Oppressed also develop mistrust of the Dominant, though often find truly intimate connections with other Oppressed. The Oppressed also frequently have distortions in cause and effect, from being burdened by the consequences of the choices made by the Dominant and the extra effort it takes to get their needs met. As Oppressed, we can even become victims that feel guilty. We might try to make sense of our helplessness or relative difficulty in getting what we need by believing that if we just figure out the right choice next time, we won't be helpless anymore. In this way, we might come to feel guilty or at fault for being mistreated and underprivileged.

Both the Dominant and the Oppressed dehumanize the other. Both the Dominant and the Oppressed think of the other in blaming and shaming terms, as the source of their problems and believe that the other needs to change in order for life to get better. These shared qualities among all operating in the Dominance Paradigm give us some clues as to what the alternate paradigm for true empowerment should include.

THE RAR=E PARADIGM FOR TRUE EMPOWERMENT

The antithesis of the Dominance Paradigm would be: (a) regardless of threat and regardless of privilege status, to rehumanize interactions with everyone; (b) to focus on oneself as the source of true power, and (c) to develop the repertoire of skills for enacting our power. In the true empowerment paradigm I propose, these three elements are called Personal Respect, Personal Accountability, and Personal Responsibility. These elements are represented by the acronym RAR=E. **R**espect, **A**ccountability, **R**esponsibility=**E**mpowerment. I describe each of the RAR=E components below.

RESPECT

In the Dominance Paradigm, the term "respect" often means submission or fear. But the Latin roots of the word "respect" mean "to look again." At its most basic, Respect in the RAR=E Paradigm means simply "looking again" or giving attention. We give attention to what we value and find worthy. Thus, Respect in the RAR=E Paradigm is to give value and worth to self and others under all circumstances.

The habit and practice of attending will bring empowerment, but the skills of the Respect component go beyond that. The next level of Respect is to hold basic human value for all (even those who might be trying to dominate you), then making a commitment to nonharm. The highest level of Respect skills involve investment of your time, energy and other resources in one's own or others' growth and development.

We can easily see how Respect for ourselves would be empowering, but how does Respect for others—even those who are trying to dominate us—give us empowerment? The answer is that Respect for others is the only way to stay whole ourselves. In order to disrespect something in you, I have to numb out my empathy for you and anything in me that is similar to that aspect of you. Any chronic numbing is essentially an amputation of aspects of myself. In this case, those aspects I am

numbing in order to disrespect someone else are my highest human qualities—arguably the aspects of myself I can least do without in the quest for true power.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability in the Dominance Paradigm has connotations of blame and shame. In the RAR=E Paradigm, Accountability is defined simply as “the ability to account for one’s experience and choices.” The skills of the Accountability component include self-focus, self-awareness, and self-expression. The Threat Responses push us towards other-focus; building the habit and ability for turning our focus back to ourselves will take conscious effort. Simple training is usually sufficient to learn the skill (such as is offered in Gendlin’s *Focusing* book⁶ or other mindfulness training). The challenge is in creating the habit so deeply that it no longer requires such conscious effort. The other-focus of the Threat Response is like a road with deep ruts—we have a hard time steering in directions that don’t follow the ruts. Developing the habit of self-focus requires the effort to pave a new road such that the new road becomes as easy to go down as the built-in Threat Response road.

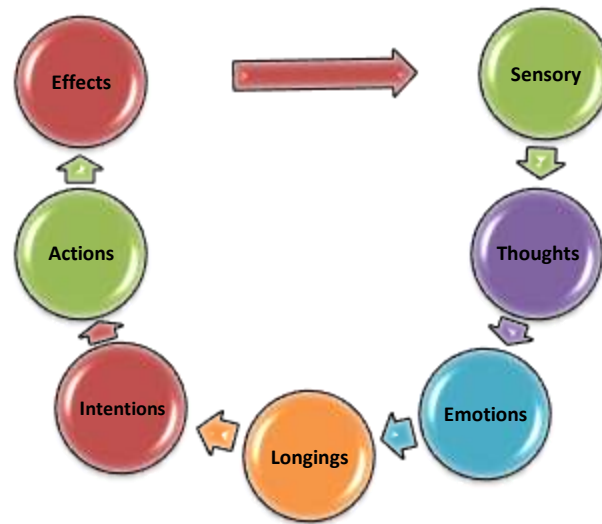
Once we have self-focus, we then need the skills of self-awareness—the ability to understand or know what it is we are experiencing. Self-awareness appears to develop naturally so long as nothing blocks it. We have numerous defense mechanisms to block awareness of certain aspects of experience. Because these mechanisms are “designed” to keep us unaware, we need tools for finding awareness anyway. One such tool I use is called the Personal Awareness Path, which identifies a “road map” for noticing and identifying our internal experience. The Personal Awareness Path (Figure 1) identifies experience as beginning with sensory stimuli, which we then interpret (thoughts). Out of our thoughts arise emotions and our emotions give rise to longings. Our intentions are formed out of our longings and in turn give rise to our actions. Having a road map such as this helps us realize aspects of our experience that have not been available to consciousness previously.

The third skill of Accountability is Accountable Self-Expression. It includes the “I” statement element while also calling on us to be thorough, to include our best awareness of all the components of the Personal Awareness Path. Accountable Self-Expression is a core alternative to the Threat Responses. When we use Accountable Self-Expression to seek understanding, we now have a basis for negotiation and conflict resolution, for self-management, and for setting boundaries—all effective alternatives to the dysfunctional Threat Responses.

Accountability defined this way imparts power because it involves deep self-awareness. Self-awareness leads to consciousness of what we want or intend in a situation, which in turn provides opportunities to serve those longings and intentions. Serving our longings and intentions effectively is the core of what is meant by true empowerment.

⁶ Gendlin, E. (1982) Focusing, 2nd Ed. Bantam Books.

Figure 1: Personal Awareness Path



RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility in the Dominance Paradigm carries connotations of burden and obligation. In the RAR=E Paradigm, Responsibility is defined as "the ability to respond effectively according to one's own longings and intentions." As such, Responsibility, in the RAR=E Paradigm, calls for us to develop an ever more refined repertoire of skills to use in the service of our own longings and intentions.

Some of the skills we need have already been described in the Respect and Accountability sections. In addition, as implied earlier in this article, we all generally need to develop and refine our skills for self-management of our Threat Response. Most of us in U.S. American culture also have not been socialized with appropriate skills for boundary-setting, negotiation or conflict resolution and would gain empowerment from learning these.

A key skill for self-management of the Threat Response is diaphragmatic or "belly" breathing. Just as the deer in my prior example took several very deep breaths as part of coming out of the shutdown state, when we take deep breaths we can "reset" our nervous systems. In the Belly Breathing technique, you take a full six counts to breathe in, hold for six counts, and take a full six counts to release and repeat this several times. When done correctly, the diaphragm muscle, which is at the area where the rib cages meet, should be expanding, making the belly push out. It appears that when the diaphragm muscle is stretched, the parasympathetic nervous system is triggered. The Threat Response is the activation of the sympathetic nervous system which readies us for the fight, flight or fright responses. The parasympathetic nervous system serves to return us to equilibrium. They operate in such a way that the degree that one is activated means the other is deactivated. The ability to activate the parasympathetic gives us a tool for deactivating the Threat Response. It is simple to learn and can be done effectively in nearly all circumstances.

A full description of other self-management skills or the skills of boundary-setting, negotiation or conflict resolution skills is beyond the scope of this article. (They are taught in EmpowerCE workshops and other articles.)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE

We are most effective and functional in our power practices when the three components are in balance. Respect without Accountability and Responsibility offers nothing more than benevolent presence. Accountability without Respect can lead to a supersized, shaming superego. Accountability without Responsibility can lead to guilty helplessness. Responsibility without Accountability can lead to misguided efforts that are ineffective. Responsibility without Respect can lead to harmful action. One who balances Respect, Accountability, and Responsibility is a compassionate, well-guided, artful power.

IMMUNITY FROM DOMINANCE

The skills of the RAR=E Paradigm offer immunity to the lures and perils of Dominance. When we Respect ourselves well, others' disrespect has little threat-value to us. When we take shame out of our inner world, it cannot be used to control us. Similarly, when we have basic Respect towards others, we take out dehumanization of another. Remember that dehumanizing another is a ticket to the Dominance Paradigm, which is disempowering to all. Once we find that level of personal Respect for self and others, it cannot be taken from us without our complicity. When we really understand the process of Accountability, we take unconsciousness and blame out of the equation. Dominance strategies depend heavily on unconsciousness to be effective. We have more trouble using Dominance strategies ourselves when we are fully conscious of our own motives and the impact we are having. When we learn the self-focus of Accountability processes, the whole issue of blame becomes irrelevant. Sorting out who is to blame feels like wasted energy when you really understand that true empowerment lies in knowing yourself, how you work, and what drives you. Once we reach that level of personal Accountability, it cannot be taken from us without our complicity. When we deeply grasp the concept that empowerment also lies in creating effective choices for ourselves, and when we have begun to see the fruits of developing our personal skills, we let go of unnecessary helplessness. We also make a different kind of peace with the aspects of life that are not within our realm of influence. We take those aspects into account and develop our choices realistically. Once we reach this level of personal Responsibility, it cannot be taken from us without our complicity.

Because Respect, Accountability, and Responsibility cannot be taken from us by force, these qualities are immune from Dominance—the empowerment of these qualities cannot be taken from us. This is not to say we are free from *attempts* to dominate, only that the tactics and strategies of Dominance will not be effective in truly controlling us.

In the Dominance Paradigm, change comes when the Oppressed have nothing left to lose and rise up in violent rebellion. In the RAR=E Paradigm, change comes through anchoring oneself in that which cannot be taken.

For more in-depth training on Respect, Accountability and Responsibility skills and on using the RAR=E Paradigm in psychotherapy, attend “The Wisdom of Three Thousand Lives” workshop series offered through www.empowerce.com. In those workshops, treatment of anxiety and depression, violence and aggression problems, and personality disorders using the RAR=E Paradigm principles will be addressed.