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### Understanding & Navigating Power Dynamics in Learning Environments

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**SCHOOL OF  
MEDICINE**

**LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OFFICE**

# **Understanding & Navigating Power Dynamics in Learning Environments**

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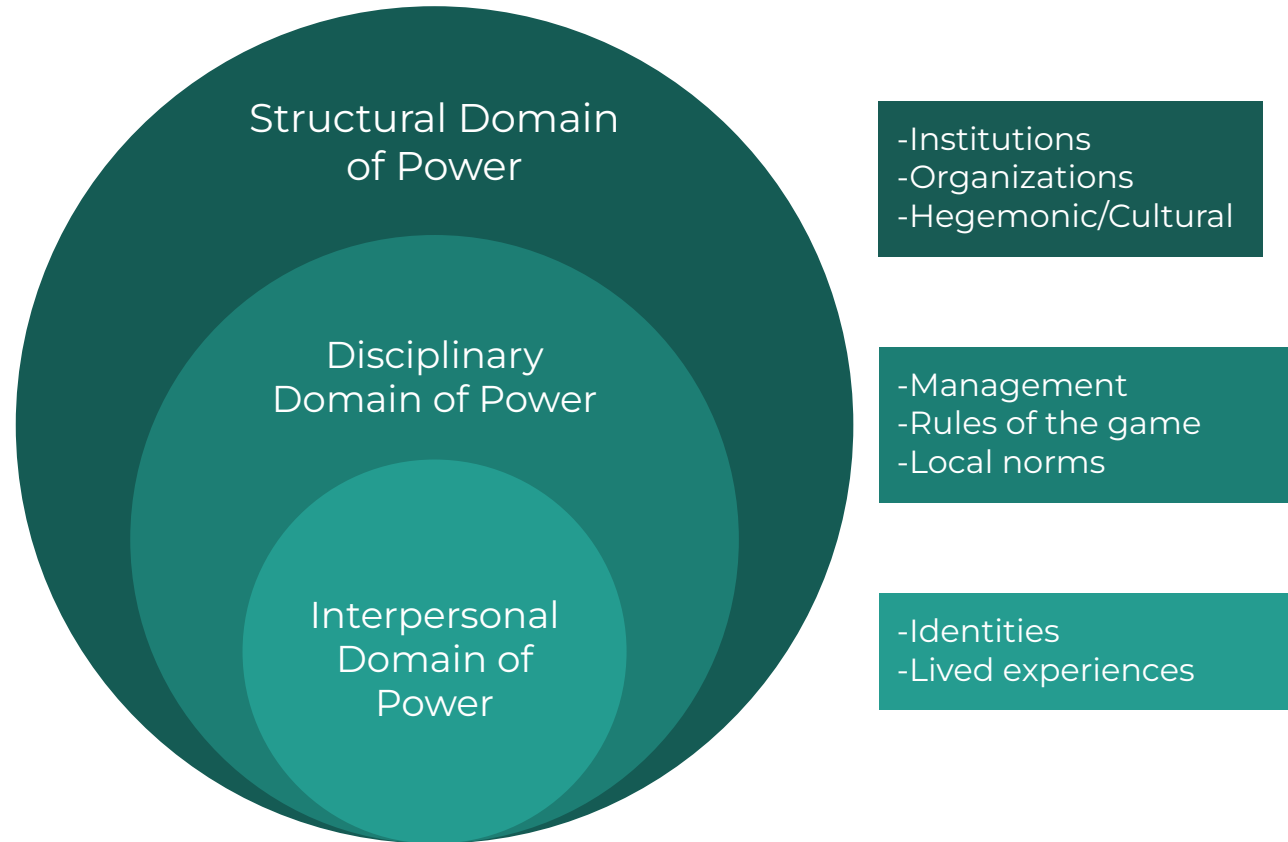
# Session Objectives

- ❑ Reflect on power, including positions we hold within hierarchies and the social identities we hold
- ❑ Recognize in which situations we may or may not be power holders, which can inform how to best ~~intervene in learning environment concerns~~ help ensure positive and inclusive learning environments

# What is Power?

- Systemic power
- Institutional power
- Individual power
- Local/contextual power

# Visual Matrix of Domination (Collins, 2009)



# What is Power?

- “The **ability to decide** who will have **access to resources**; the **capacity to direct or influence** the behavior of others, oneself, and/or the course of events.” (Scripps College, 2022)
- “The **ability or official authority to decide** what is best for others. The ability to decide who will have access to resources. The **capacity to exercise control** over others.” (Vanderbilt University, 2022)

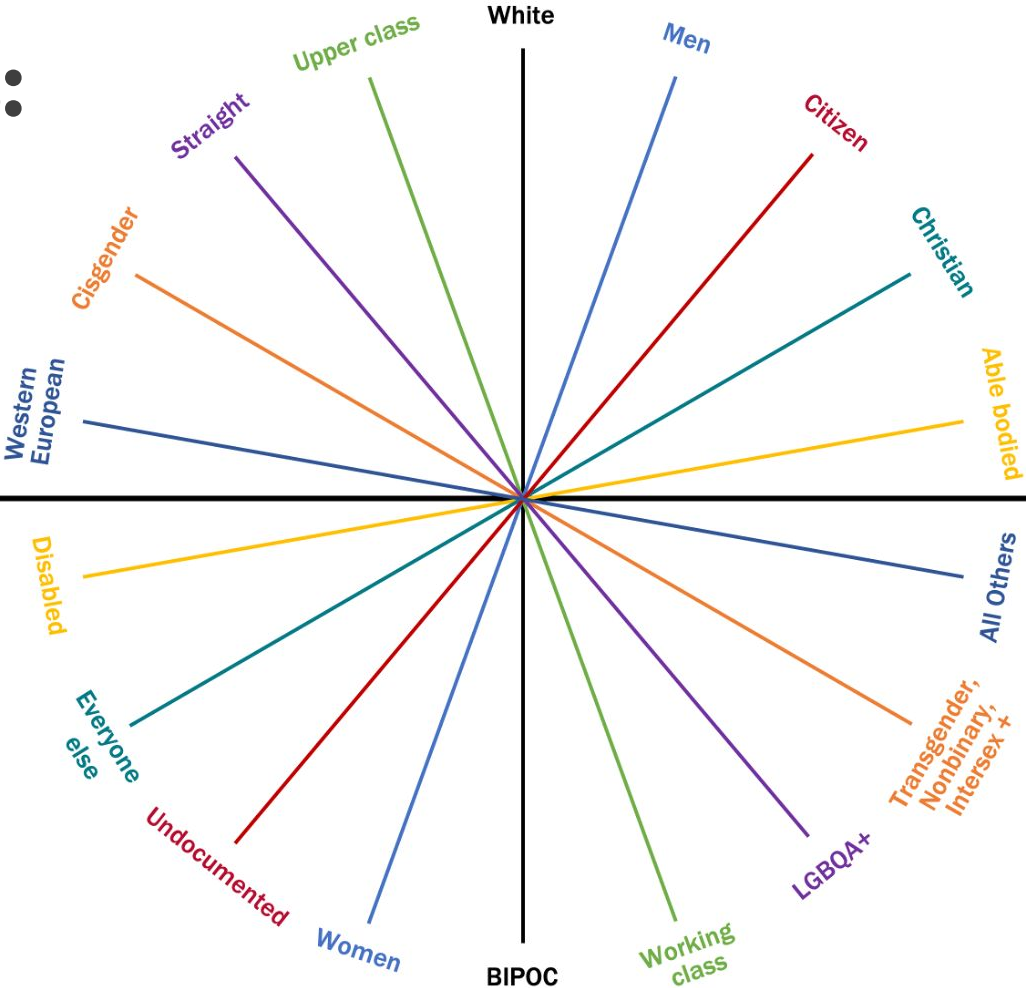
# What is Power?

- “**Power exists in relationships.** The issue is often how much relative power a person has in comparison to one's partner.” (Guerrero, 2011)
- “**Power can be disabling** when it leads to destructive patterns of communication. This can lead to the chilling effect where the less powerful person often hesitates to communicate dissatisfaction, and the demand withdrawal pattern which is when one person makes demands and the other becomes defensive and withdraws” (Mawasha, 2006).
- “I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and **unearned power conferred systemically.** Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate.” (McIntosh, 1989)

# Power Dynamics: Social Identities

Dominant  
& Privileged

Marginalized  
& Oppressed



Also consider:  
Age  
Language of origin  
Mental health  
Political affiliation  
Family structure  
Incarceration



# Power Dynamics: Roles

More Power	Less Power		More Power	Less Power
SOM	CoP, CoN, CoPH		Higher degree	Lower or no degree
MD	PhD		Respected in the field	New to the field
Senior faculty	Junior faculty		Tenured	Untenured
Faculty	Resident		Over 150k	Under 150k, <i>especially</i> under 50k
Resident	Nurse/APP		Evaluator	Evaluated
Resident	Intern		Teacher	Learner
Faculty/PI	Student		Salaried staff	Hourly staff

# Contextual Power

- Think about all the identities you hold
  - Marginalized identities (below the line) and Dominant identities (above the line)
- Think about the positions of power you hold
  - Degree, tenure, seniority, hierarchy, job security, management, etc
- Think about how all of those **intersect**
- In what situations do you think you'll have the power to respond?
  - With which of the 4 D's?
  - What can that response look like?

## The 4 D's

1. Direct
2. Delay
3. Delegate
4. Distract

# How power shifts environments

Power and power dynamics can shift learning environments either negatively or positively. Consider the following examples:

- An offensive comment is made by a student and the instructor ignores it rather than responding and intervening. Some students may lose faith and/or trust in both the student and instructor. They may disengage. They may escalate the tension.
- A racist comment is made by a white patient in front of a student of color. The instructor says to the patient that the comment is inappropriate and that type of language will not be tolerated at this institution. The instructor then checks in with the student after the patient leaves. The student feels seen and supported. Trust has been built between the student and the instructor.

**Now what?!**  
**We have lifework...**

# 1: Check yourself constantly

- In different settings, practice thinking about your own social identities, power, privilege, etc. and how they impact how you're perceiving and/or steering a conversation.
  - Such practice will help you become more automatically aware of power dynamics at play.
  - Work to be continuously self-reflective about your own privilege and power for all aspects of social and hierarchical power.
- Note: If ever you find yourself feeling defensive, we invite you to be curious about where that defensiveness is coming from rather than impulsively acting on it.

## 2: Use Inclusive Language (Vernon Wall's Strategies)

1. Press pause! Let others lead on describing themselves.
2. Show others you care through your language.
3. Check your ego at the door. Don't assume you know anything about anyone's social identities. You cannot know someone's race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. unless they have told you.

# 3: Practice makes... better

- In low-stakes settings, practice phrases you might say when an offensive comment is made.
  - **Case example 1** - someone says: “affirmative action policies are racist toward white people.”
  - **Case example 2** - a male patient says to a woman student: “I want the pretty young lady to do my physical exam” and winks.
  - **Case example 3** - in a mixed group meeting, a leader says “Faculty are so busy doing the important work that they can’t take on these extra tasks.”
- What go-to phrase can you come up with?

DO THE BEST  
YOU CAN  
UNTIL YOU  
KNOW BETTER.  
THEN WHEN YOU  
KNOW BETTER,  
DO BETTER.

*maya angelou*