

Higher Education Power and Control Wheel

A Guide to Understanding the Wheel

Introduction

The Higher Education Power and Control Wheel was an idea born out of the lived experience of members of a research team at a small online university, within the Department of Counseling. The research team included a faculty member, two PhD students, and one master's student. The faculty lead has over 20 years of experience in higher education and has experienced many behaviors in an institution that paralleled her clinical work with victims of domestic violence. Due to the inherent structure of Higher Education and the use of power-based hierarchy, this system is highly susceptible to abusive behaviors. This hierarchical structure of power rooted within higher education; remains prevalent, as seen, for example, in the tenure process and faculty ranking systems. The team endeavored to create this wheel to expose the pervasive and abusive behaviors in this system and to establish a shared language. This framework allows individuals to validate their experiences and recognize them as both real and systemic, much like the original Power and Control Wheel did for victims of domestic violence.

Overview of the research

Developing the Higher Education Power and Control Wheel involved three years of work, two research studies, and two national conference presentations. The first research study was a survey design, where respondents were invited to respond to a list of 93 statements related to abusive behaviors. The survey scale range included the following items: “Personally experienced”, “Directly observed” “Personally experienced and observed” and “Have not experienced or observed”. The 93 statements were created after a review of the research on abuses and bullying within higher education. The specific behavior statements included items such as; *My program faculty have communicated in a way that made me feel fearful* and *My program faculty have blocked me from completing work*. This quantitative study gave the research team data to begin to develop our wheel, directly from the perspective of the abuse victims.

The next step of the research was to present our drafted wheel at a national conference, to engage the audience in a discussion about research findings and hear feedback around noticeable gaps. That presentation also yielded an additional eight survey respondents.

The final step in our research was to conduct a qualitative research study and fine-tune the wheel. This study allowed us to directly hear from people who had experienced abuses in their academic department. As part of the qualitative interview, we shared the draft of our wheel and asked participants to reflect on what felt correct, areas of improvement, or missing experiences. From there, we finalized the wheel and presented it at another National conference for additional feedback.

Due to widespread stigma, fear and risks around sharing experiences of abuse and the close environment of higher education, we opted to present the wheel at a conference for feedback instead of conducting traditional focus groups. This approach allowed us to reach a broader audience and increase response rates while allowing for anonymity; underscoring the very need for the wheel itself.

Overall findings

It is becoming more widely understood that the system of higher education is one rooted in hierarchy and control, with those in power committed to ensuring that they control the continued distribution of power. This system is steeped in colonization, white supremacy and patriarchy. Initially intended for white men to gain status within their communities, the embedded structures upholding higher education continue to perpetuate cycles of power and control. Like many large systems within our social and political structure, it was specifically designed to alienate those seen as “other” in an intentional power structure. As a result, our research found that those who are abused within this structure tend to be historically marginalized individuals – women, women of color, and disabled people. While it is essential to acknowledge that anyone can be affected by the hierarchy, based on the intersection of oppression and the groups to which one may belong, this particular set of studies did not include any male respondents, despite the research calls not excluding men. It could be that white men are not aware of the abusive hierarchy, but it could also be true that if they experience abusive behaviors, as a result of their position within a department, that abuse would be inherently different from women, women of color, and members of other multiply marginalized identity groups.

This historic and systemic oppression is connected to all aspects of abusive experiences. Our understanding of the deep connection between systemic oppression and the organizational culture of postsecondary institutions is how we came to describe the outer ring of the wheel as the *Institutional Culture of Higher Education*. The wedge pieces have a relationship to the origins of higher education that simply cannot be pulled apart. The entrenched nature of the abuse is reliant on an institutional culture that *was* historically and *is* structurally designed to privilege certain groups while marginalizing others. This

culture acts as a breeding ground where individual acts of oppression are not isolated incidents but are instead sustained and reinforced by institutional norms and historical inertia. This connection to white supremacist thinking and structures is likely why it is so difficult to create change within higher education. A bit like an open secret, many within the system understand how abusive it is, but to make changes may require a dismantling of the system itself, a scary proposition for most living and working within.

In addition to the outer ring of the wheel, the center labeling of *Power and Control* is intentional, and an intended consequence of the behaviors described on the wedges, not a symptom of abuse. The purpose of the abusive behavior is ultimately to keep people out of higher ranks within the academy while maintaining power and control. As with the original Power & Control wheel, the tactics presented in the adapted wheel are not mutually exclusive but instead reinforce one another to assert continued power and control. The women who participated in the development of the original Power and Control Wheel in Duluth, MN were clear that the power and control in the center of the wheel was not their abuser's goal. What they did say is by using these tactics, he ended up with power and control over them. However, in this Higher Education Power and Control Wheel, the intention is to maintain power and control as learned from those who are subject to it.

Each wedge piece of the wheel helps to illuminate a range of behaviors and support further understanding of each abuse tactic. In reading the wheel, it is helpful to think of each item on the wheel as purposeful, intentional, and symptomatic of a larger problem. For example, the "gaslighting" wedge expands understanding around the ways in which faculty or students are left feeling confused or made to believe that the abusive behavior either did not happen or that their reactions to the abuse are problematic. Or that what is happening is not abuse but preparation and training for being allowed into this group.

Using the wheel

Our wheel aims to give language to the experience of abuse within higher education settings and to help those subject to these tactics be able to correctly identify and name abuse. Users of our wheel will note that there are no mentions of physical or sexual abuse within the wedges. While this is not to say that these abuses do not occur, our participants indicated abuse in this domain is most often based on psychological abuse tactics such as; emotional abuse, verbal abuse, or blocking of resources.

The wheel can also be used to support those in positions of power to better recognize abusive behaviors, create inclusive workspace cultures, and better understand the impact of this abuse on employees and students.

About the authors:

Jennifer Preston, PhD, NCC, LPC – Dr. Preston is a professor and Department Chair of a small online counseling department. She has over 20 years as a professor of counseling, and 7 years of clinical experience working within the family and domestic violence area. She is passionate about dismantling higher education as a system of oppression, with the hopes of creating more access for both students and faculty.

Nicole Xenos, PhD, LPC - Dr. Xenos is a counselor educator, supervisor and licensed counselor. Her work focuses on supporting survivors of Narcissistic and psychological abuse and religious trauma; particularly on how identity impacts these experiences. As a trained Gestalt counselor, Dr. Xenos applies their theory towards liberation practices, incorporating systems work, anti-racist, and decolonial emphasis in supporting healing and wholeness. Their practice, Painted One Healing, focuses on the use of cultural connections and bridging Western and Eastern modalities to create individualized care for each person.

Devan Livaudais, MA, LPCC – Devan is a mental health therapist, supervisor-in-training, and doctoral student in Counselor Education & Supervision. Their work centers queer and neurodivergent communities, integrating Relational Cultural Theory, narrative practices, and liberatory pedagogy across therapy, teaching, and supervision. In both private practice and academic settings, Devan is committed to creating accessible, relational, and culturally responsive spaces that support identity development, critical consciousness, and community care.

Jonobie Ford, MA, LMHCA - Jonobie is a therapist and coach dedicated to helping people feel more whole. With a background in tech and clinical mental health, she blends practical experience with humanistic, common-factors training. She holds an MS in Computer Science from UT Austin and an MA in Counseling from Saybrook University. Clinically, she supports queer, neurodivergent, and polyamorous clients navigating trauma, self-worth, and identity development.

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