



Power and Powerlessness

Overview: This activity is designed to begin a discussion of power by exploring people's experiences of power and powerlessness. It serves as an introduction to "power over", or oppressive power, and the sources of our own power to transform our lives and make change.

Purpose: In order to create change, we need to understand the power we are up against and how it affects us in different ways, and begin exploring how we also have power. This activity helps participants examine how they have experienced different manifestations of power and powerlessness in their lives. From this foundation, the activity builds an understanding of both power over and the capacities and sources of power we can cultivate to make change.

Time: 1 hour

Materials:

- 5-6 different colours of paper cut in half or cards (a few for each participant)
- Flip chart
- Markers
- Power Point or flip chart with definitions below

Credit: Developed by JASS over many years

Process:

Introduction

Begin by introducing the topic of power and powerlessness and that everyone has experience both at different points and in different ways in their lives. This activity will allow us to understand power more deeply and begin to uncover aspects of our own power.

Facilitator Note: It is not important to define these concepts at the beginning of the activity as it begins with peoples' lived experiences.



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In small groups: (10 -15 minutes)

- Give everyone a sheet of paper.
 - Individually they draw a line down the middle. On one side they will draw one situation that made them feel powerful. On the other side a situation that made them feel powerless. This is a quick drawing exercise. Encourage them to draw something they are willing to share with others, not something they want to keep private.

Facilitator Note: Many people do not feel confident about drawing. Explain that the quality of artwork is not important but that even very simple drawing helps us think about and communicate our experiences with fresh eyes.

- In their small groups have them explain their drawings, answering the questions:
 - What made you feel powerless? How was power used to control your life or suppress your voice?
 - What made you feel powerful and why? How did you use your power individually or with others to enhance your life, make your voice heard or change a situation?
- Each group should identify a few examples of each.

In plenary:

- Ask for a sample of examples for each category- powerful and powerless.
- Ask: What do these tell us about negative uses of and positive uses of power?
 - We are looking at two very different kinds of power: Power Over and Transformative Power.
- Power Over
 - Definition: have someone read the definition of “power over” out loud. (in box below) How does that match with what they described with their drawings?
 - Power Over affects us in all aspects of our lives:
 - In the “private” sphere of the home and family, in the “public” sphere of the community, institutions, government and other places outside the home and also, inside us - the “personal” realm.
 - Reviewing the drawings and thinking about their experiences, ask them to name ways that “power over” is exercised in each of these spheres.
 - *Facilitator Note: the personal realm is often where we are impacted by and feel fear, shame, lack of confidence, self-doubt.*



- Affirm that while we have all experienced power over, none of us is completely powerless.
- Transforming Power: See definition below.
 - Give participants the accompanying handout: Sources of Transformative Power and review each type.
 - Make connections with the examples of positive and transformational power they drew (For example, they might have described feeling powerful by: speaking up, refusing or resisting, problem-solving, getting information, doing something ethical, organizing with others, confronting someone, working with others to get something done, etc.).
 - Also notice that these kinds of power also help us in our private, public and personal realms.
- Synthesize some of the key points made. Affirm that power is complex and dynamic, can be positive and negative, oppressive or liberating, and is both individual and collective.

Power Over Vs Transformative Power

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” - Martin Luther King; US Civil Rights leader

“**Power over** is the ability to control and make decisions for others, with or without their consent. Power over can take on oppressive and destructive forms, perpetuated by the threat or use of violence. This zero-sum view of power is based on the perception that there is only a finite amount of resources or access and follows the maxim of, “if you get more, I get less.”

“**Transformative power,**” on the other hand, refers to power relationships that reject the domination and exclusion of some persons by others. Transformative power grows from respect for self and equality with others - in all their diversity of identity, experience and ability. It is the power inside us (“power within”), the collective power together with others (“power with”), our ability to speak out and act (“power to”) and in the power to work for the change we want (“power for”). These alternatives offer positive ways of expressing power that enables us to create more equitable relationships and structures and to transforming power over.



Sources of Transformative Power

Power within: Refers to person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge, realization that they have power, their capacity to hope, imagine, think critically, question assumptions, say no or yes, respect others, collaborate; power that is grounded in values of our human rights and fundamental dignity. Sometimes referred to as "personal empowerment" -- often manifested in acts of confidence and courage.

Power to: Refers to unique potential of everyone to shape his or her life and world, the ability to speak up or take action, for instance, to join a protest, write a banner, organize a meeting, scream, remain silent or defy that which is being dictated to someone. "Power to" is about what sometimes is called *agency* – the willingness and capacity to act – and builds on power within and power with.

Power with: Refers to the power of/in numbers acting together to achieve a common goal. It is about people unified across differences by shared purpose and multiplying their individual talents, knowledge and resources to make a larger impact. It is about the collective power found in community and common ground.

Power for: Refers to the combined vision, values and agenda of change that inspires us and informs the work we do. It builds on the other forms of transformative power and encourages us to create strategies and alternative institutions, relationships and ways of living that reflect our beliefs and hold the seeds of the world we seek to create.

Developed by JASS, Just Associates