

Power and powerlessness

Everyone has experienced power dynamics in different ways in their lives. In this activity, we explore what power means to us and uncover aspects of our own power before introducing new information and ideas.

Step 1. Power drawings

Materials: Sheets of letter-size/A4 paper, coloured pens, flipchart, Handout: *What and Where is Power?*

Individually: Give each person a sheet of paper and pens and invite them to:

- Draw a line down the middle.
- On one side of the line, draw a situation where you felt powerful.
- On the other side of the line draw a situation that made you feel powerless.
- Choose specific moments and situations rather than “a general time when...”
- Focus on something you are comfortable sharing with others.

Remind everyone that the quality of artwork is not important. A simple line drawing can help us see our experiences with fresh eyes. Draw or find images that reflect feeling powerful/powerless, since images can be highly evocative. Or choose a few words that capture your experience.

Small groups: Pick a timekeeper to signal time. Each of the three or four people in a group has five minutes to explain their drawings or images, share their experiences, and speak to the following questions:

- What was it like to feel powerless?
- What caused you to feel powerless?
- How was power used or experienced to control your actions or suppress your voice?
- What made you feel powerful, and why? How did you use or express your power individually or with others to enhance your life, make your voice heard, or change a situation?

Plenary: For a gallery walk, each group posts drawings and images on the wall. In turn, each group presents a quick synthesis of their reflections. Then, together, discuss the feelings that people have shared, identifying the different experiences of power, powerlessness, or feeling powerful. Draw out people’s own understandings and meanings. Invite them to share concepts or definitions of power or empowerment from their prior experience. As the facilitator, record these so everyone can see the evolving ideas. Ask guiding questions:

- Looking at all the drawings and reflections, what is it like to feel powerless or disempowered? What is it like to feel powerful?
- What do these drawings show us about the different ways that power operates?

- What would you describe and name these different kinds of negative and positive power?
- How do you see power being contested or conflicted? How is power transformative?
- What do you conclude about power from this process? What insights have you gained?

Individually: Think about power, powerlessness, and feeling powerful. Each person writes down on a card, in large letters with a bold marker, a short statement or a few words describing each of these terms.

Small groups: Using the Open Space method, people form groups to discuss the term that interests them most: power, powerlessness, or feeling powerful. In their group, people share thoughts and create a symbol or drawing together with a short definition. Encourage them to use metaphors and write/draw their ideas on a piece of flipchart paper or using digital tools to share in plenary.

Plenary: Groups take turns to present their ideas and invite quick responses. Keep the pace brisk.

Step 2. Enact a scene or embody a sculpture

This can be an addition or an alternative to Step 1. If time allows, go through both steps. Use this process to extend and embody understandings of power, building directly on the drawings and stories shared in Step 1.

Small groups: A body sculpture can be silent or include repetitive motions or sounds. Design the positioning of group members by improvising.

- Choose one picture, story, or part of a story you want to represent – or combine elements of more than one story.
- Aim to convey the feeling of experiencing power and/or powerlessness.
- To make a body sculpture, position yourselves in a symbolic configuration or a snapshot of one moment.

For a skit or scene:

- Enact one specific part of the story.
- Choose whether to mime (using silent acting) or include short dialogue or sounds.
- Allocate roles, dialogue (if any), and action.
- Keep the scene short.

Using our bodies in this way can be challenging, especially if we have experienced trauma in our lives. Explain that anyone not comfortable with acting in a scene or body sculpting can just observe. Be aware of your own actions and movements and how others might experience them. Initiate any physical contact gently and slowly, leaving spaces between actors (unless your group is experienced with theatre and comfortable with physical contact). Be mindful of cultural and gender differences in what is acceptable for physical interaction and contact between people in an exercise or presentation.

Plenary: Designate a stage area on one side of the room where groups take turns to perform their scenes and body sculptures. After each performance, ask the audience to share – in just one or two words – what they felt seeing the sculpture or scene. Then ask a few to share what they think was happening. Finally, ask the group who performed to explain the sculpture or scene.

Keep the debriefs after each performance short. Draw out the embodied experience and feelings of both the performers and the audience. Hold off on more analytical or conceptual discussion until all groups have performed.

After all the presentations and reflections, engage the group in summarising the feelings they have expressed and experienced by acting and watching. Then identify the different kinds of experiences of power, powerlessness, or empowerment that were represented, drawing out participants' own understandings and meanings. Invite participants to share any useful concepts or definitions of power or empowerment from their prior experience and knowledge.

- Think about how you felt in these scenes and body sculptures, and how you felt watching them.
- What is it like to feel powerless or disempowered? What is it like to feel powerful?
- What do these scenes show us about the different ways that power operates?
- How would you describe different kinds of negative and positive power?

Step 3: What is power?

Distribute copies of the *Handout: What and Where is Power?* for everyone to read.

Plenary: With reference to groups' presentations from Steps 1 and/or 2, discuss:

- What resonates with your understanding?
- What is different?
- What do you conclude about power from this process?
- What further insights have you gained?

Summarise key points and note that the group will return to these meanings of power and enrich them with further definitions and frameworks in later activities.