

ACTIVITY 3:

Power and narratives

Explore how narratives are part of invisible and systemic power, shaping and reinforcing norms, beliefs, and ideologies through socialisation, cultural traditions, and behaviour – and through the systemic power of patriarchy, structural racism, extractive capitalism, and colonialism. In narratives, invisible and systemic power meet visible and hidden power. Powerful actors can leverage the power of beliefs and prejudices to achieve their ends.

In this activity, groups apply a framework to delve into the various layers that make up a narrative (stories, messages and explanations, communication, values and behaviour, and who benefits).

Materials: Flipchart paper, markers, handout: Invisible and systemic power in narratives

Step 1: How are narratives related to invisible and systemic power?

Plenary: Refer to, repeat, or do two activities:

1. *Arenas of Power* framework in Chapter 3: Making Sense of Power
2. *The Master's House* activity in Chapter 4: Identity, Intersectionality, and Power

Review the concept and meaning of invisible and systemic power. Ask participants what they remember from *The Master's House* activity.

We can track invisible and systemic power working through different narrative strategies.

Narratives that divide – causing fragmentation among allies, weakening movement unity, exploiting existing faultlines and prejudices

Narratives that de-legitimise, stigmatise and criminalise activists and movements – undermining community leadership, fomenting distrust

Narratives that distract – focusing attention elsewhere, away from actual issues

Narratives that promote despair – reiterating powerlessness and oppression.

Narratives that drive danger – creating fear, criminalising people, justifying violence

Individually: Looking at the handout Invisible and systemic power in narratives, each person reflects on their own experience of these different kinds of power.

Plenary: People share reflections on the impact of dominant narratives. Discuss how these narratives reinforce one another.

Step 2: Applying the framework

Plenary: Referring to the handout: Invisible and systemic power in narratives, discuss how invisible and systemic power are socialised, institutionalised, and mobilised or activated.

Ask:

- How are the stories, messages, and explanations in dominant narratives mobilised to serve the interests of particular groups?
- How are these narratives institutionalised in the family, law, education system, religions, economic and political structures, and social systems?
- How do these narratives build on – and reinforce – deeper layers of socialised values, beliefs, norms, and habits? How are they related to the systemic logic behind relationships?
- What is the impact of narratives on people’s lives? How do these narratives serve the political and economic interests of those who promote them?

Step 3: How do invisible and systemic power underpin a narrative?

Explore one example together, using the questions below, before applying the framework in plenary or small groups. One example is the narratives about LGBTQI+ people. You could choose another example.

Plenary: To understand how invisible and systemic power underpin a narrative, focus on the example of LGBTQI+ people. Unpack the stories, messages, and explanations in the dominant narrative, and then examine how this is enabled by – and reinforces – invisible and systemic power. Discuss personal experiences of this narrative.

What are the main **messages, stories, and explanations** in the dominant narrative? Think about the difference between the messages you hear and the stories behind them. For example:

Messages: “LGBTQI+ people put our kids at risk.”

Stories: “LGBTQI+ people are immoral and outsiders, not part of our families, and prey on our children.”

Underlying beliefs: “Non-heterosexual relationships are evil, sinful, and unnatural.”

How are these messages **communicated**, and by whom? For example:

In conservative religious communities (sermons, literature, school lessons, informally), by religious leaders, educators, community members

In political messages, speeches, and campaign materials, by politicians, party officials and activists, conservative media outlets, party supporters.

In social media, everyday language, parents with their children.

in symbols, images, cultural activities, social and body cues.

What **actions** or **impact** do these messages produce? **Whose interests** do they advance? For example:

Everyday exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people.
Violence, hostility, and harassment.
Laws and policies that discriminate against LGBTQI+ people, such as marriage rights.
Conservative and traditional explanations of an unequal social order and strict gender roles with males as dominant fathers and women as mothers and carers.
Patriarchal control of sexuality for the purpose of reproduction only.
Domestic violence as a private matter.

What is the **dominant narrative** created by the above? For example:

LGBTQI+ people are outsiders, immoral, not normal human beings, not part of our families and communities; they don't belong in society and pose a threat to our children.

What kinds of institutions and structures in society give strength to – or are strengthened by – this narrative? For example:

The 'traditional family' is the centre of society; marriage is for the purpose of raising children; sex is for reproduction, not pleasure; any sexual or gender expression or identity that does not conform to these values is a threat to society.

What kinds of **socialised values, norms, and beliefs** are behind this narrative? For example:

Beliefs and ideologies: conservative religious beliefs, traditions and teachings about sex and sexuality, families, gender, women's roles, and marriage.
Social norms: patriarchal views about marriage between a man and a woman only (heteronormative) emphasising that there are only two genders – male and female – with their 'proper' roles in society – masculine and feminine – (binary-gendered as 'normal').
Embodied habits: gendered behavioural norms of masculinity, femininity, sexuality; how we reproduce these norms in our everyday speech, behaviour, and actions.

Plenary or small groups: Explore another dominant narrative of interest to the group, using the same questions and drawing on the example above. Alternatively, small groups work on different narratives. If working in small groups, share highlights in plenary.

Step 4: Transforming narratives and invisible power

Plenary: So how can we break this cycle and transform the dominant narratives?

Invite a quick brainstorm of ideas, without going into depth on specific strategies. List ideas on cards or flipcharts, and cluster into categories if helpful. Raise or emphasise the following key points in the discussion:

A starting point for shifting a dominant narrative – and the invisible and systemic power behind it – is to identify and express our own positive narratives and visions of society.

We call these positive narratives ‘contrasting’ or ‘transformational’. If we use the terms ‘alternative’ or ‘counter-narratives’, we are still centring the dominant narratives which give them power. Positive narratives have always been there.

We reveal and elevate positive narratives that are already there – grounded in long-standing progressive values and beliefs – rather than talk about ‘creating’ new ones.

Exploring the emotional resonance of narratives is a good starting point for identifying positive narratives. Notice how the dominant narrative makes you feel. Which of your own values or beliefs do you feel are challenged by this narrative? Which of your values or beliefs contrast with this dominant narrative?

What are some examples of positive and contrasting narratives and messages? For example:

Narrative: LGBTQI+ people are loved and loving parts of families.
Message: love makes a family, love is love, we all belong.

Narrative: all black, indigenous, and people of colour have as much value and significance as any other human being
Message: Black Lives Matter

Small groups: All work with the same dominant narrative, or each group works on a different one. Each group has ten minutes to reflect on the questions and five minutes to prepare a creative drawing or dramatic presentation. Start by reflecting individually on one of the dominant narratives we explored today with these two questions:

How does the dominant narrative make you feel?
Which of your values and beliefs does the narrative contradict?

On pieces of paper or cards, write short, simple statements that express your own values and beliefs on the theme. Write from the heart, and don't worry about exact words.

Take turns each sharing one or two statements that you feel very strongly about.

Cluster the statements into categories, and choose one cluster to discuss together:

- Which values and beliefs do you hold that lie behind these statements?
- Where do they come from?
- How do you live and express these values and beliefs in daily life?

Prepare a short, creative presentation – a diagram, drawing, symbol, message, dramatic scene, or body sculpture – to show what the dominant narrative looks like and what your own contrasting values, beliefs, and behaviour look like. Be creative and expressive, and feel free to use images, symbols, or metaphors to convey your values, beliefs, and ways of being.

Step 5: Bringing our values to life

Plenary: Ask each group to share their creative representation of the dominant narrative and the values and beliefs of the group. After each presentation, invite a quick round of reactions:

- What did you see or hear? How do you feel?
- What values and beliefs are being expressed?

Values, norms, and beliefs are in constant flux and are contested. In every moment, they can be affirmed or resisted, complied with or rejected, through words and behaviour. Invisible power shifts and evolves, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes passively, sometimes due to proactive agency. It can at times be strategic or safer for activists to remain silent and 'comply'. How and when do we resist or comply with dominant narratives?

Share the handout Resisting dominant narratives. Discuss how we resist or refuse to comply with a dominant narrative. Ask:

- What are some examples of strategic resistance to narratives?
- What values and beliefs give strength to our position?
- Where do these values and beliefs come from?
- Who has upheld them over time? Who or what has inspired us?
- Is there a transformational narrative that flows from these values and beliefs? If so, what is it?