



Patterns of Power

Overview: This activity engages a group in acting out familiar power dynamics in different aspects of life to better “see” them and to explore what changes would make them equitable and just.

Purpose: Power dynamics are part of all parts of our lives and even inequitable ones can seem normal or natural because they are so familiar. This activity helps make power “visible” so we can better understand how it works. By playing various dynamics out, participants can see them more clearly and examine the impact on their lives, voices and leadership. The second stage of the activity invites participants to imagine how those relationships could change and become more equitable and just. This can also feed into a visioning exercise about the changed future we work toward.

Time: 90 minutes – 2 hours

Materials:

- Space to move work in small groups
- Flip chart, tape and markers

Credit: JASS, drawing on the rich tradition of Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed

Process:

In Plenary:

- Introduction: Introduce the idea that power dynamics are part of every aspect of our lives from the public arenas of decision-making, culture and laws to our organizations to our families. Power at its simplest is about the ability to do something. One-way power is manifest in whose voice matters, who decides, who controls and who has access to resources. We are going to look at those dynamics more closely to better understand how power is working in our contexts and to see what would make them more equitable and just.





- Divide group into 4 smaller groups*. Each is assigned a realm of life:
 1. Family
 2. Community or movement organization
 3. Governmental or legislative body
 4. Global institution (e.g. IMF, World Bank)

**You may also want to include one more group for “the couple” (those involved in an intimate relationship, in marriage or some other form of union). Understanding this relationship of power is key for advocacy on AIDS, domestic violence and reproductive and sexual rights and health, amongst others.*

- Explain that each is going to create a short skit that illustrates the typical power dynamics in the assigned realm of life. They are also going to imagine and present a part 2 skit that illustrates change in those dynamics that makes them more equitable.

In small groups:

- For each: ask the group to identify the current power patterns they typically experience or see – the dynamics that undermine, exclude or devalue us.
- Now brainstorm together, answering the following question:
 - Equity in the _____ (family/community, etc) looks like_____.
- Think about: who is making decisions and how, what kind of power is being exercised, whose voice is listened to and what kind of leadership is demonstrated.
- Once they have done these two steps, they want to develop a short two-part skit (no more than 5 minutes). It should begin by showing current patterns of power, stop in a freeze frame, and then transition to showing the patterns of power you would like to see in your imagined future.

In plenary:

- Each group presents the first part of its skit and freezes in place. A person from the group asks the audience to comment (and write up their responses on a flip chart):
 - *In this first part of the skit, what do you see about the patterns of power? In which actions did you observe them? What impacts do these patterns have on the people involved?*
- At the end of the first round of discussion, the group carries out the second half. After, the group again invites the audience to comment (and write up their responses on a flip chart):
 - *What changed in the second half? What did you feel about the changes made?*



- After all skits are presented, open a group discussion:
 - What was common among the skits? What was different?
 - What are the dynamics of gender and power you see here? What about race, ethnicity or class?
- *Facilitator Note: If none of the above came up in the skits (race, gender, etc.), engage the group in reflecting on how they see power dynamics excluding, marginalizing and silencing people based on identity and position, and the impact of that.)*
 - In what ways did we imagine changing the patterns of power? And what insights from that do you think we can take into our own lives, leadership and organizations?
- Synthesis.