Power (over, with, to)

By Sabrina Nichol, Kent State University (Peace and Conflict Studies major)

'Power' is most commonly understood as authoritative and associated with dominance. It is often recognized as an individual, group, or institution's capacity to influence or control the actions and behaviors of others. This popular notion of what power means, and the seemingly impenetrable qualities or that come with it, often leads individuals to perceive power as a negative concept. People may see power as an entity that cannot be shifted.

Defining the different forms of power helps to acknowledge power not as static, but as a fluid and dynamic presence in relationships. If we shift our understanding, power can be used to create positive change.

Definitions (from [A New Weave of Power](), Just Associates):

Power Over is a type of power driven by fear. Those with 'power over' implement this fear through acts of force, coercion and control. Power over may also act to incite hatred and violence through language and policies.

Power With is shared power built on respect, collaboration and empowerment through relationships. Power with can be achieved by finding common ground among different interests and leads to collective action centered on connection and mutual respect. Power with is often synonymous with solidarity and accompaniment.

Power Within refers to the unique potential of every person to shape their life. It is based on the belief that every individual has the power to make a difference. Power within is often associated with individual empowerment and confidence. It is a recognition of individual agency.

Power To is typically associated with the power to take action. This may be formal or informal, but is often associated with decision making authority. For example, police officers have the power to decide who to pull over for speeding, however, oftentimes more than one person is doing it. This authoritative position gives officers the power to take action against drivers breaking the law by speeding.

Significance:

Our conception of power can shape how we understand both political and civic engagement. Broadening our definition of power - from a top-down concept to a multi-dimension concept - allows us to both understand and address unequal power structures, as well as bring individuals together to achieve a common goal for their community. For example, building collective, shared

power can aid in identifying ways to improve the function and structure of a neighborhood association to meet the needs of all neighborhood members. Unequal structural power (e.g. power to or power over) can lead to oppression.

Power structure refers to the hierarchical interrelationships that exist within a group or organization. Those at the top of a power structure, whether a group or a single individual, have control over others within that structure. Being able to recognize and distinguish different forms of power held by members within a power structure is essential in order for marginalized groups to come together, leverage their connection and identify collective interests.

When used not as an act of force, but as an act of collaboration and empowerment, power can be used by historically marginalized and oppressed groups to combat systemic inequality and challenge unequal power structures.

Links:

Power Over, Power With, and Power to Relations: Critical Reflections on Public Relations, the Dominant Coalition, and Activism
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532754xjprr1701_3

Power and Making Change Happen
https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2016/02/pub1455011688.pdf

A New Weave of Power, People & Politics
https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/07chap3_power_final.pdf

Archon Fung
https://vimeo.com/229159521

John Gaventa's Powercube
https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/the-power-in-the-powercube/

Related Tools:

Power analysis, *example*: https://www.powercube.net/an-introduction-to-power-analysis/

Stakeholder-interest analysis, *example*:
https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main