

EQUALISING POWER

Reflective ideas & questions

Equalising power is part of co-design, but sometimes it can be challenging to notice our own power. These are some ideas and questions to explore, alone or in a group, which may be helpful.

- Power is about your ability to influence outcomes
- Power is relative and relational. It's not just about how much you can influence in the world, but also how much influence you have in relation to others.
- Power is related to privilege.
- Unchecked power can make spaces and outcomes inequitable and unsafe.



Most people hold privilege in some areas and lack privilege in others, and like power, it can be hard to notice. Some people have lots of privilege, and some people have hardly any at all.

Privilege can be another source of power and inequity.

Race
Class
Faith
Sexual orientation
Gender identity
Disability
Mental health
Health
Education level
Literacy
Past trauma
Age
Citizenship...

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Expert power. Being perceived as holding important, expert knowledge. It is often tied to disciplines, seniority and qualifications. *If you disagree with different people in the group, who is most likely to be believed?*

Legitimate power. Your formal and/or legal authority, and is often related to your discipline, organisation and/or job role. You might have the power to end the group or change the topic. In a mental health space, it also relates to the authority you (and others in your role) can have over others. For consumers, this is a very significant power difference. *What formal authority do you have in relation to the group, or the people in it, that may give you more or less influence?*

Referent power. Being admired and/or agreeable. Referent power (or the lack of it) is often related to individual qualities but can be socially ascribed to particular groups or social roles which are perceived as admired or 'other'. Referent power can be challenging for consumers to maintain while also sharing messages that are emotion-laden, hard to hear or push against the status quo. *Do you tend to raise points that are consistent with dominant beliefs, or which challenge them? Do people tend to agree with you easily, or argue with you?*

Coercive power. Being able to do something others do not want or withdraw something they value. You might be able to withdraw funding or support, or be critical in the media, or go on strike. You may be able to have someone medicated against their will. Coercive power doesn't have to be exerted to have an influence, perception alone can increase influence. For consumers, past experiences of direct coercion in services can make this particular power feel very strong, especially if participating with a service they have used themselves. *Do you have the ability to do things to others in the group that may prevent them from speaking openly?*

Reward power. Being able to give things that others want or take away things they don't want. This can include being able to provide ongoing employment opportunities, or funding, support or opportunities that others desire. Reward power, like coercive power, can rest with individuals, roles and organisations. *Do you have the ability to give things to people that they really want, and how might this influence frank and free communication?*

Two other types of power are worth considering:

- **Informational power.** Having information that others want or need
- **Connection power.** Having access to people with legitimate, coercive or reward power