

Different Forms of Power

Systemic Power describes the power inherent in socioeconomic relationships. Systems that hold power in our society include government, business, education, justice, media, family, health, faith groups, community organizations, etc. Power and control over these institutions gives the individuals and groups in power significant privilege. Their values create environments that either increase barriers for individuals with less privilege or decrease barriers for individuals with more privilege.

Positional Power describes power that can come with positions within hierarchies, including age, experience, and titles (i.e. PhD, professionals, celebrities, executive directors, elected reps, chairperson, etc.). Systemic values may then offer those with higher positional power even more privilege. In peer support groups, the participation of professionals and other high status individuals can change the power dynamics, shifting how other members share and engage in the group.

Personal Power describes the power within each individual to take action, to make decisions and to participate. Confidence arising from personal power leads some people to take up more space and time in groups, dominating discussions and planning. Personal power can be enhanced or limited depending on the influence of systemic power and positional power. Individuals belonging to higher-valued groups are given greater access, decision making power, and reflected more in leadership positions in the system. They may thus feel a greater sense of personal power. For example, adults may wield more personal power than youth or older adults.

These forms of power intersect and significantly impact each other. An individual can feel more personal power in one group and yet not in another depending on how the systemic values affect the environment of that group. Alternatively, an individual who faces multiple barriers may feel powerless in all situations and these barriers affect how a person engages in groups (intersectionality of identities also affect the power dynamics any individual or group may experience).