

Understanding Power

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Power is the ability to influence or direct the actions of others or to direct our own actions. Power is an abstract concept; it cannot be seen or touched. It is present in every human relationship and comes into being when people interact. Power on its own is not good or bad, but we can make judgements about how, by whom and on whom it is used.

In comparison to some other cultures, New Zealanders tend not to feel comfortable with the power associated with big hierarchies, deference or authority. They often prefer a more even distribution of power where people are treated as equals.

In the mental health system, professionals have traditionally had a lot of power; they have been the authority figures who decided right or wrong, true or false, and how funding would be used. The mental health system was based on their often unchallenged beliefs. This is slowly changing. Service users are gaining power and influence over what goes on. Māori have also gained power and resources to run their own services.

There are many types of power. Advocates need to understand the different types of power to identify injustices, develop tactics and understand different people's opportunities and limitations.

Position power is the formal authority a person holds, because of the position they hold. A manager has position power that gives them the authority to manage budgets and fire people. A police officer has the power to detain and arrest people. A politician has the power to vote on legislation before parliament. Position power is a very obvious and important type of power.

Interpersonal power is more often innate rather than bestowed. It is the ability of individuals to attract others and build loyalty through their own charisma, personal qualities, track record or fame. Famous people with interpersonal power include Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King and Sonja Davies. Interpersonal power is sometimes less obvious than position power, but in a culture that recognises individual merit, it is a very effective form of power.

Expert power is derived from a person's skills and expertise and the degree to which others need their expertise. Examples of people with expert power are information technology specialists, plumbers and doctors. Expert power is specific to particular situations and relationships.

Information power is comes from being well informed and being able to use that information to persuade others. It is much broader than expert power and may involve a person's ability to find out what is going on from a variety of sources. For example, a person who talks to key people and reads important documents before a meeting has more information power than does a person who comes to the meeting unprepared.

Reward power is a person's ability to provide incentives to others for doing something the person wants them to do. A manager has reward power because

they can give pay rises or promotions. A parent has reward power because they can offer incentives to their child to change the child's behaviour.

Coercive power is the ability to apply negative consequences to, punish or limit the freedom of others who do something the person with power does not want or believes is bad. Coercive power is used, for example, by the criminal justice system, a manager who fires an employee or a clinician who puts a person under a compulsory treatment order.

More information

'Power', *Wikipedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/power> (last modified 2 July 2008).

