

COMMUNITY ALPHABET

POWER DYNAMICS AND BIAS



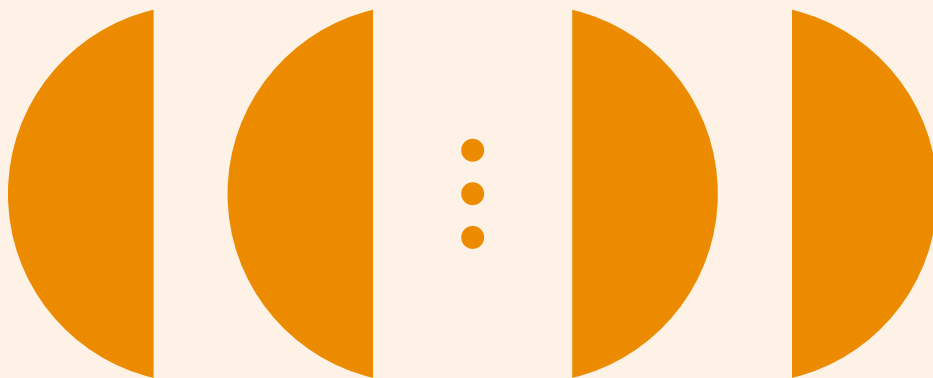
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NADACE VIA

POWER BASICS

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To have power is to be able to **influence outcomes**, for yourself and others. This can happen through direct decision making, but also in more subtle ways as through the ability to persuade or influence others.

Power can come from many **sources**, often interconnected. Social status, position, financial and material resources, knowledge and relationships can all be sources of power.



How people's identity and attributes interact with the **norms and ideals** of the society they live in also influences their power in different situations, since it affects how other people, and society as a whole, understand and react to them.

Power is not only something you can exercise **over other people** or external processes such as politics. Financial standing and education are examples of things that influence the power you have over your own **life choices**, such as what to do for work or where to live.

POWER ANALYSIS IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

In community building, seeking to understand power dynamics is relevant

- in being able to **understand and make sense** of what we hear from the diversity of people and groups in the community
- to make sure our work in our teams, groups and communities is **inclusive and built on equal opportunities**,
- in our relationships with people and institutions **who can influence** the community and the people in it in different ways

Petr, a Czech CA participant, lives and works in a housing estate that is home to both Czech and Roma residents who, Petr says, *live next to each other, not together*. Petr tries to **engage people from both groups in activities and build bridges between them**. He says: *Each person is unique. Maybe I can listen to each separately and bring to the table what they have in common.*

In the spring of 2024, he and his team began talking with residents on the street, informally interviewing them to find out about their interests, skills and what they wanted for their neighbourhood. What Petr had learned about power dynamics in CA helped him navigate the context: *The [Roma residents] look at me differently because I'm white and I have a different starting point than they do. It helped me realise my position. So we found out we still need to be careful, and continue the trust building process.*

Read a [case study about Petr's work here](#).

VISIBLE, INVISIBLE AND HIDDEN POWER

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Sometimes power is very easy to see, but a lot of power is exercised behind the scenes. This classification comes from Lise VanKlasen and Valerie Miller, who in turn build on the work of Stephen Luke and John Gaventa.

Visible power is the power to make decisions. It's often the easiest power to spot, held by politicians, leaders, parents and others who have formal authority in their contexts.

Hidden power is the power behind the scenes, over process and agenda. Hidden power is to influence how decisions are made, on the basis of what information, who is involved in the process and what the discussions should be about.

Invisible power is about social norms and ideas. Invisible power shapes how people think, about for example their own situation, about what's right and wrong, what is a problem and what is not, and what solutions and changes can be imagined.¹

Though there are dominant norms and power structures in society at large, specific people may exercise visible, hidden and invisible power in some arenas or sub-groups but not in others, and in diverse communities there's also likely to exist a diversity of norm systems.

WORKSHEET

In this [power dynamics worksheet](#) you can map out the power dynamics of your own community or project.

¹ Valerie Miller et al., [Making Change Happen 3: Power](#), Just Associates, 2020. Retrieved 18 October, 2024.

One way that power plays out in groups, communities and in the world, is through bias. Bias is stereotypes, prejudice and preference that makes us act unfairly towards others. We all have bias to some extent - it's built into the way our brains work. It's often unconscious, and is influenced by what we've experienced ourselves, by friends and family and by media and culture.

There are many different types of bias, and some can have a big influence on power dynamics in a group or a community. For example:



- **Stereotype bias** is when we draw conclusions about people based on specific characteristics, such as their race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, age, class, sexual orientation, gender identity or nationality.
- **Perception bias** is based on conclusions we draw about a person just based on their appearance. It can be linked to the stereotypes when the characteristics are visible, but may also be based on for example people's clothes, looks or the way they talk or move.
- **Affinity bias** means that it's easier for us to like and trust people that are similar to ourselves, both when it comes to identities and attributes, and values, experiences and personality traits.



- **Availability bias** is similar, and means that we draw our conclusions based on the information that is most readily available, without knowing if it is representative.
- **Halo/Horns effect** means that we draw conclusions about a person's ability or personality in one field based on what we think about them in another area.
- **Confirmation bias** makes us more open to information that confirms what we already believe, while we're more likely to ignore or not believe information that goes against our current views. This is true for all people, and can make it even harder to change biases and preconceptions. A related concept is **blind spot bias**, which means it's easier to recognise bias and prejudice in other people than in ourselves.

VIDEO

This [video can help you start thinking about your own biases](#).²

EXERCISE

If you want to **talk about bias and prejudice with a group**, check out the "Not Me!" exercise on page 58 of the methods book [Dialogue in Divided Societies](#) (see the Resources section below).



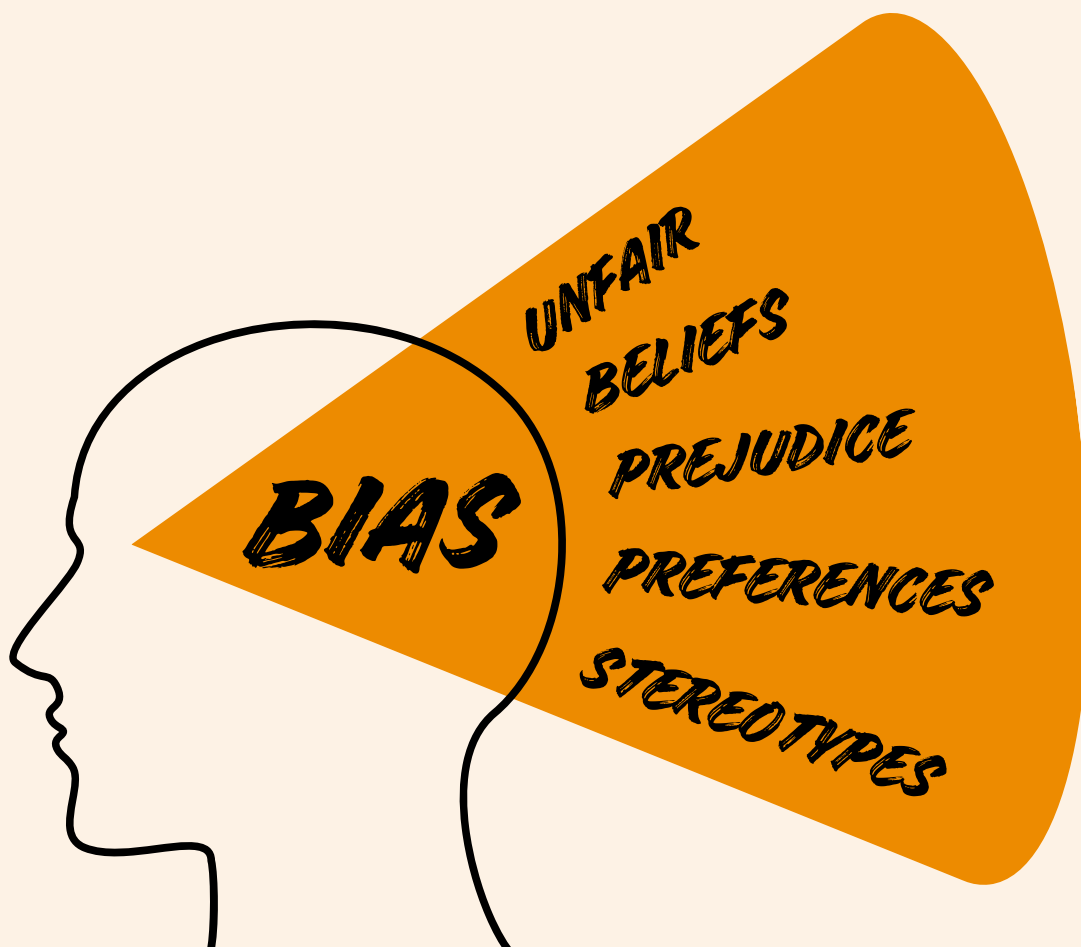
² AWES, "[Thinking About Your Bias](#)", 2021. Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

BIAS, NORMS AND PRIVILEGE

Power also plays out through affecting who and what we remember to think about.

- If the norm is that a leader is a white man, we may not even think about the woman of a different skin colour as a possible candidate.
- If the norm is to walk, we may not remember to make sure there is wheelchair access when we organise a community meeting.
- If the norm is to be Christian or secular, we may mistakenly organise our gathering on an important Muslim or Jewish holiday.

Norms and biases create advantages (privileges) for some people and disadvantages for others, without either of them really having earned their position.



BIAS, NORMS AND PRIVILEGE

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- **In the moment**, bias and norms influences who is included and who feels included, who gets which opportunities and whose voices are heard and listened to.
- **Over time**, biases and norms tend to reproduce themselves, since people in power tend to give opportunities to those who are similar to themselves and who fit the norm for that position, and to build systems based on their own ideas and preferences.

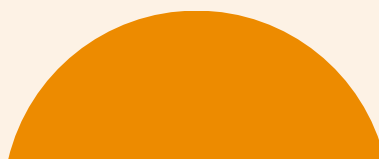
It can be hard to see these patterns if you yourself are not a victim of discrimination or bias. Following diversity activists on social media or reading some of many “privilege checklists” online can help you learn more.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of your five best friends. How many of them are a different gender or gender identity than you? Race or ethnicity? Sexual orientation? Age? Class? How many have a different functionality/(dis)ability? How do you think this group of people have influenced your own stereotypes and biases?

If you want to do this reflection with a group you can use the [Circle of Trust exercise](#),³ here with instructions from Session Lab.



³ William Ek-Uvelius et. al., [Circle of Trust exercise](#), Session Lab, 2021. Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

BIAS AND POWER IN THE COMMUNITY

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There is a lot of research on how unconscious bias influences decision making and fairness in everything from medical care to recruitment processes to urban planning. Here are some ways it may play out in community building.

- It's likely going to be **easier for us** to sympathise with, see strengths in and take into account the ideas of people who are similar to ourselves or who fulfil the stereotype of a capable and powerful person in our communities. This may be men rather than women, the dominant ethnic group rather than the marginalised, etc.
- When we **invite people** to be a part of our processes, we may forget to make sure we include groups that are invisibilised or marginalised in the community. Where and how we communicate, when and where we host our events, who is represented on the organising committee - all these things and more matter to who feels included and welcome.
- By the **way we communicate and act**, we may contribute to those of us who belong to marginalised groups feeling "othered" and not welcome or accepted as they are. Asking someone where they are "really from" because they look different from the majority group or asking a gay boy if he has a girlfriend because you assume he's straight are things that can contribute to othering.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of a time when you treated someone in an unkind or unfair way because of bias. How did you realise that your behaviour was biased? Where do you think that bias came from? What did you do? Is there anything you could have done differently?

COUNTERACTING BIAS AND FOSTERING INCLUSION

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It's not enough to know that we have bias, we also have to take responsibility for changing how it affects us and the people around us. There are two main strategies to do this. To work to unlearn and relearn your own biases is one. But since this can be very hard and take time, it's maybe even more important to have tools and strategies to minimise the effect bias has on our behaviour.

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- **Recognise** in which ways you are privileged, and how you may be biased. You can start by taking and reflecting on this [test of friction and privilege](#).
- Since bias comes from fast, automatised thinking, it's important to **stop and think**, question your assumptions and self reflect. You can do this when something happens, or regularly for example in a journal. **Asking for feedback** can also be helpful, remember that blind spot bias and confirmation bias can make it hard for us to see our own biases!
- **Widen your horizons** with new perspectives, and help others do the same. By following diverse voices in social media, learning about the experiences of different marginalised groups in your community and spending time with people from diverse backgrounds and identity groups you can learn a lot about how different people experience the world and what you can do to be an ally to those who have less power than you do.

COUNTERACTING BIAS AND FOSTERING INCLUSION

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- **Build systems** that minimise automatic decision making about people, and filter out the information that can give rise to bias. This can be things like taking away names and pictures from applications to be a part of a project. Thinking through the requirements is also important, so that they don't shut people out unnecessarily.
- **Include diversity and inclusion** as a lens in all stages of planning, doing and evaluating. Systematically look for missing perspectives, for example by using checklists that can be found online. Make sure you don't hand over the responsibility for inclusion work to other people based on your own bias of who should know about it!
- **React to and question bias** and prejudice when you see it in others. It can be as simple as saying "that's not okay". Think about whether it's appropriate to call someone out in public, or if it's better to talk to them privately.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

In what ways could you get better at counteracting bias and fostering inclusion in your context?

BUILDING OTHER TYPES OF POWER

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Miller and VanKlasen call the way we normally think about power, and that is presented in the first slide and explored in the slides about bias, “power over”. But they also describe three other forms of power - power to, power with and power within. These are creative powers that allow people to work for change and to challenge negative “power over” dynamics.

- Power with is the power of relationships. We build power with by listening to each other, finding common ground, and helping each other in everyday life. Power with allows us to work together toward shared goals, and multiplies the efforts and resources of the individuals.
- Power to is the power to act and do. It can be supported by capacities, skills and confidence, and is in essence the power of every person to take action in their own lives and contexts. Power allows us to take initiative, start a project, and go from thought to action.
- Power within is about a person’s sense of self worth, and about the ability to vision, dream and have hope. It’s essential to support the other aspects of power and to our sense of identity. Power within can be strengthened through self-expression, the arts and time for reflection (see Millar, Valerie et. al in Resources section below).

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

How does your work in the community build these other forms of power? Are there things you could do to further strengthen any of these aspects of power? Can you use these forms of power to challenge negative “power over” dynamics in your community?



RESOURCES

- Fitzduff, Mari and Sue Williams. [*Dialogue in Divided Societies – Skills for Working with Groups in Conflict*](#). Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019. Retrieved on 5 November, 2024.

Also referenced in the Tension and Conflict presentation, this compendium also contains exercises on prejudice and identity, as well as power, to work with a group.

- Lamont, Amélie. "[The Guide to Allyship](#)." Retrieved 17 October, 2024.

An open source guide on how to be a better ally to groups facing social injustice, with useful tips and perspectives.

- Miller, Valerie et al. [*Making Change Happen 3: Power*](#). Just Associates, 2020. Retrieved 18 October, 2024.

This material gives a more in depth explanation of several of the ideas of power presented here, and on how to counteract unjust forms of visible, invisible and hidden power.

Also, we encourage you to find people working with diversity and inclusion in your own context to follow on social media or other platforms! Mixing up your news feed with new perspectives can help you see your own community in a new light.

Return to the [Useful tools page](#).