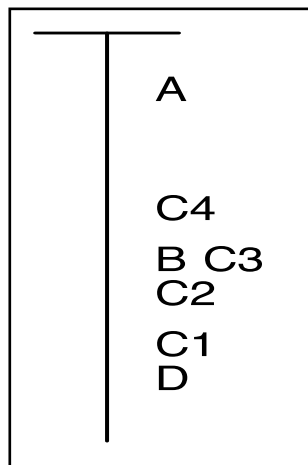


STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS: THE POWER POLE

The “power pole” indicates relative power, which may be a combination of economic, ideological and/or political power. Most intentional social change may be seen as an attempt by one or more groups to move up the power pole.



If the social change is effective, the group’s position (C1) will improve (to C2, C3, or C4). The relative power has changed considerably; the gap between A and C is now less, between D and C is greater, and between B and C may even be reversed. C will have more power, by definition; whether that means that A, B, or D must have less depends on whether you think power is infinite or finite and where C’s power came from.

Whoever was controlling C’s choices has less control now. If power is finite, then some groups have less power now over C, than they did before. It is important to know who will have less because they are likely to fight to retain that power. If D loses any power as a result of C gaining more, ethical questions arise - is it acceptable to increase power at the expense of those who have less to begin with?

POINTS TO PONDER

- *Do you think relative power is finite or infinite? Construct a power pole: place on it yourself, the major groups who have power-over you, and the major groups who have power-with you. Is there any way that you can take more control of choices in your own life without anyone else on the pole losing some control in your life?*
- *The general perception is that people don’t want to lose power, relatively or absolutely. Under what circumstances are you willing for another group to move up the power pole, relative to others including yourself? Under what circumstances are you willing for another group to move up the power pole if you will lose power in absolute terms (you might start by thinking about marae getting funding that previously went to Pakeha performance groups?)*

Dictionary definitions of “empower” include “giving power to”, “permitting”, “giving authority to”, and “enfranchising”. It implies a person or group (A) with relatively more power enabling another person or group (B) to move up the power pole. The emphasis is on A as the active party; however, power cannot truly shift unless B moves to take it, becoming the active party. It is probably more useful to think of the degree of resistance A has to B’s taking power, which may range from negligible to considerable. An individual or group A may choose not to exercise its positional power-over B, but is still attached to the position until there is structural change. A may not want to exercise influence, but it is difficult to stop B from being influenced by the inequality in power. Often people who believe that they want to divest themselves of power-over others, for example, over their children, find themselves resisting when it is taken eventually.

Top-down or bottom-up change

Top-down social change is driven by elites; an example is the imposition of Rogernomics. Bottom-up change is driven by flax-roots pressure; an example is homosexual law reform. Top-down change can utilise power-over others, for example, to pass a law, but bottom-up change cannot, unless people are willing to act illegally by using violence, sabotage or other coercion.

The most frequent exception is when power-with among large numbers of people is transformed into effective alliances and converted to power-over. Alliances need to be well-co-ordinated and planned to act in concert – for example in voting or boycotting. They also need cohesion, loyalty among members and willingness to act, good communication and effective decision-making. These factors can be improved by an external threat or other issue relating to their common interest.

An effective alliance may also trigger an opposing alliance of those feeling threatened by the newly powerful group. It is very difficult for alliances to remain effective over long periods of time, due to power-plays, and shifts in focus from common interests to overwhelming differences. -).

Bottom-up strategies for social change may also use power-with the dominant group, if the oppressed group has knowledge or a relationship with them that the dominant group values. But power-with in a relationship that has an inherent power imbalance carries high costs for the party with less power.

The problem is that for a relationship to be sustainable, both parties must contribute resources of equal value to the other party. If one party has more power, they have more control of resources and are more likely to be able to contribute more. This forces the other party to be more compliant, and leads to resentment at best.

On the other hand, some social movements have decided that they do not want to try to move up the power pole, collectively or individually. Reasons include -

- Unwillingness to define oneself in terms of the powerful
- Not wanting to use means they don't agree with to achieve their goals
- Believing it is futile to play the game when the dominant group make the rules
- Not wanting to engage in a power-play with a group whose members live next door, so that the struggle comes out of Parliament into the neighbourhood or the kitchen.

Some people argue that one has to compromise and at least pretend to share dominant values to be invited to join the elite so they can change the system. Others counterclaim that the very process of climbing the power pole changes one's perspective; using the Wave model this is like taking a journey away from the wave to look at the hole in the ground. This means that by the time they gets to the top they no longer want to change the system.

This thinking can lead to despair, or to the development of alternatives, such as separating from the existing system to create another.