

CAT 5

Power and powerlessness

Work sheet II

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Power and powerlessness are omnipresent. It starts with the fact that words have power. How we occupy a word or how it is occupied is an expression of power - or powerlessness. The word power makes it very obvious. Many people understand the concept of power as a vertical force, coming from above, which can force individuals or entire societies to act against their will. Just like many government directives to relieve the medical care system in the acute phase of the corona crisis. They intervene massively in basic rights and legitimise these interventions by virtue of their office. If you look closely, you will immediately find a distinction between the apparently powerful and the powerless. The seemingly powerful demand obedience and can punish us through the executive. The difficulty with this definition of power: the power remains with a few and these few also very quickly find themselves forced to act, so it describes an act of powerlessness. If we look at it from the perspective of the ATCC power space model, we usually find a system of powerlessness here.

Defining the word *power* differently is the first question of power. Who has the power of definition? In language, it is majorities that suddenly develop a different understanding of power. Winning these majorities is an important task for civil society. It then no longer needs the attributes: "new" power or counter-power. Power flows into everyday life as a constructive force. I experience this when I work with educators, NGOs, administrations or companies. At the moment when this word receives a constructive reference, we leave the space of impotence. When power is placed in a vital relation to values and the basic dimensions of power are trust, responsibility and dialogue, we come into action. There is of course a lot of uncertainty, since we were rather passive in the space of powerlessness. It is also connected with the "unfinished". Power itself is processual. With power we become visible and vulnerable. If we transfer this to our work in society and thus in the space of power, those in power need the option of giving instructions and of enforcement in order to carry out their task. This is based on the agreed values. It must be directly linked to the task, needs everyone's trust and is in constant dialogue (see also the worksheet on the ATCC power space model). Constructive power also means that we are all responsible, give and receive trust, and all need dialogue. So I cannot stand up and point to the power holder, but my responsibility is to demand that she*he also carries out her*his task. A powerful social order does not release anyone from responsibility. It does not free us from the struggle with trust and always seeks dialogue to clarify the process.

Roles of power according to our approach

Roles of power, in everyday language usage, are mostly roles that trigger a feeling of being at the mercy of others. They are people who seem to be at the top of the hierarchy and therefore have

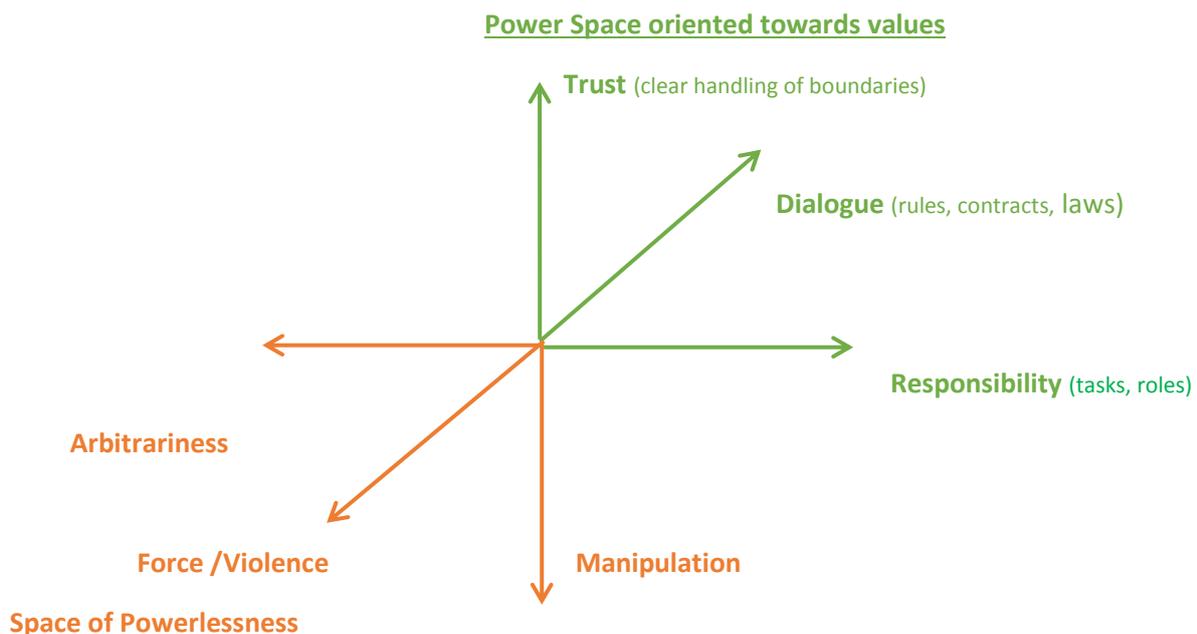
coercive means available. As already described above, maybe these people are constrained too and only pass on their own powerlessness downwards. Please do not consider those who are currently in this position as victims. They too can take responsibility, create trust and enable dialogue. We prefer to look at ourselves. What roles do we actually have? Where are we involved and where do we have clear responsibilities and the ability to act? How do we ensure that we are trusted in this role and what paths do we have for dialogue? This awareness of power is fundamental to achieving goals. Recognizing one's own power means merging lines of action and using them as a lever for change.

An example: If I want to get away from coal and nuclear power generation, I have to be aware that I am an electricity customer. So I have a clear responsibility because I can make a choice today. I can apply for energy access from energy companies that do not support these energy sources. I can then ensure that these companies are trustworthy in their offer. Some companies report regularly on their energy production, others keep silent about the fact that most of them still have coal and nuclear power generation in their program. A dialogue in public space could help them to leave this energy generation as quickly as possible. Dialogues can also be forced. Actions of civil disobedience help here. These actions are powerful when they are responsible, trustworthy and dialogic in the message. If they are similar to the aforementioned energy company, i.e. arbitrary, manipulative and compulsively oriented, this fight will usually end in favor of the energy company. These are stronger in generating powerlessness.

So it is important to set your own role in relation to the space of values and the vectors of power.

Power and powerlessness

Power is the means to make value-oriented goals of a group or organization a reality. Power is made up of responsibility, trust and dialogue.



Examples:

Responsibility: A clear assumption of responsibility for a health system that has had to work for profit in the past decades. Taking responsibility for oneself and society in times of crisis. For example, to stand up for your own health and that of others. To prevent the number of deaths from increasing due to environmental pollution.

Trust: Clear naming of limits and existing potential. Clearly address the possibilities and dangers of new borrowing. Communicating your failure without blaming others for it.

Dialogue: Open discussion of what responsibility should be transferred and also how much feedback we need to have trust. Values and the attitudes that result from them are openly addressed. Include the population in many decision-making processes.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness is a form of forced passivity. Existing resources cannot be used or are destroyed. Essential characteristics of powerlessness are:

Arbitrariness: Suddenly, without an immediate connection, things are possible that were unthinkable before. It is not clear for what purpose the sudden possibilities are being used. The decision to restrict freedom of movement was made on the basis of assumptions. How a distribution of funds takes place in an almost unimaginable extent is obscure. The proportionality between 9 million people who die from environmental pollution, the 120,000 annual deaths from active and passive smoking in Germany and the massive restrictions during the acute Covid-19 phase.

Manipulation: There are many ways of manipulation. For example, they can be constant repetitions of threat scenarios. Unclear numbers games, such as simply recording people who are reported as tested and infected. These are related to the deaths and a mortality rate is determined from this. Lockdown appeared like a sanction for the few who have behaved "wrong". Moral interpretations of questioning an exceptional situation. To talk about overburdened hospitals instead of the privatization of the health system, which has contributed to the fact that no preparations have been made for epidemics.

Coercion / violence: Harsh penalties and threats of punishment if the restrictions are not complied with.

Power

A powerful civil society is the **guarantor** for the assumption of responsibility on a small as well as on a large scale. It creates trust in both manageable and large contexts. Checks out what is coming from the government. She discusses this and puts doubts wherever they are in order. This is called democracy.

Note: This text was written during the first weeks of lockdown in Germany in Spring 2020.