



## Power/Identity and Influence

"The issue of **power imbalance** is rarely raised, or even acknowledged when raised by others, by those in the ostensibly more powerful organisations ..... We have heard local authority officers vehemently deny that the community sector representatives with whom they worked would view them as powerful. By contrast, community sector people always raise the issue and frequently argue equally vehemently that it represents a very real problem." Huxham and Vangen (1996) p14

**Differences of power** between people and agencies working in partnership can be key to understanding what is happening and why, as well as to working out how to respond best. There are many sources of power, such as traditional power through position or authority, through holding resources or information, through negative or 'gate-keeping' power, through personal influence or skills. Similarly agencies may derive power from these sources. Often people within a group wield power too simply from who they are: their identity(ies). They may be white people, men, heterosexuals, able-bodied people; they may belong to powerful professional groups, such as doctors or accountants. They may hold several of these identities at once. Robert Chambers' work (1997) on power and identity is especially helpful in understanding the issues and is summarised below.

### 'Uppers' and 'lowers'

"Many human relationships can be seen ... in terms of hierarchies of power and weakness, of dominance and subordination ... Most people have uppers above them and lowers below them. Most are uppers at times, in some roles and contexts, and lowers at others." Chambers(1997) pp58-59

Dimension	Uppers	Lowers
International	north IMF donors professional	south poor countries recipients local person
Inborn and social	eg. male white privileged ethnic groups	eg. female black excluded ethnic groups
Life cycle	old person parent mother-in-law	young person child daughter-in-law
Bureaucratic organisation	senior manager official warden	junior worker supplicant inmate

### **Deference and standardisation**

"people are taught from childhood to defer to uppers traditional education teaches people to see humans as standardised, not as 'infinitely diverse'. People become entities to be counted, or objects to be dissected."

Chambers (1997) p61

Old Henry Ford the First, now dead  
reputedly, while living, said  
Americans should never lack  
their Model-Ts, so long as black.

This way of acting still persists  
Professionals are reductionists  
And bureaucrats embrace the norm  
that programmes should be uniform.

The poor are look-alikes and weak.  
We know their needs. They need not speak.  
Our mass production's sure to please  
Let's make our programme Model-Ts. Quoted in Chamber

"In the final analysis, power is the right to have your definition of reality prevail over other people's definition of reality."

Dorothy Rowe (1989), cited by Chambers (1997)

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