

## Learning activity

# Exploring privilege and rank

**TIME:** 90-120 mins

### **LEARNING AIMS:**

- Building awareness around privilege and power dynamics in groups
- Becoming more aware of power and privilege individuals hold in groups and considering ways of navigating this well
- Building skill, literacy and courage in speaking about these themes
- Self-awareness and emotional literacy
- Strengthening trust and deeper connection in the group.

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:** 10-16

**PREPARATION AND MATERIALS:** Flipchart paper, markers

### **FRAMING:**

This session will support participants in exploring privileges and power they hold in groups. The session focuses mostly on self-reflection and how to navigate the issue of power helpfully on the individual level, so that we best use our resources to serve the group's purpose and contribute to everyone's wellbeing. Unskillful use of power and privilege can often be a source of conflict and lack of resilience in social movements. Learning how to recognise unhelpful patterns and how to work with power beyond shame and guilt will make our movements more effective and long-lasting. The session uses the theoretical framework of 'rank' to look at power and privilege.

### **What is rank?**

Rank can be described as a sum of someone's privileges and power at any given moment.

Rank refers to the privileges we have relative to one another in relationships, in our groups/communities and in the world. Privilege refers to the access to benefits and resources that result from our membership of certain groups e.g. being white, being born a man, having received a lot of education. Rank is complex in that in any one moment we will have a mix of high and low ranks in relation to each other. It is also contextual. Often, we are not aware of our high ranks and we notice more easily when we have low rank. When they are ignored they cause conflict in our relationships and groups.

### **Types of rank:**

**Social rank** - e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, income, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, education, health, and physical abilities.

**Contextual rank** - changes depending on the situation, every group and organisation has its own rank structures, based on the norms and values it establishes. For example, in some contexts you may have high rank as a man, and in some it may be low (this does not negate the privilege of being a man in all contexts, under the system of patriarchy).

**Psychological rank** - comes from life experiences; self-awareness, having received love and positive feedback from friends and family as a child, sense of great conviction or justice, surviving and healing from suffering.

**Spiritual rank** - being connected to something bigger than ourselves (not necessarily understood in religious terms) or something that keeps us centred and at ease in the midst of difficulties.

It's important to see that rank and privilege are structural and not individual. It has nothing to do with being good or being bad. It's not about guilt or shame.

We can't get rid of rank or run away from it while these systems of oppression remain in place. But we can become aware of the rank dynamics and privileges in our interactions with others. And we can learn to use our rank and privilege more wisely for each other's benefit.

Talking about power and privilege might bring up resistance in participants and might be difficult emotionally, especially for those who have not had a chance to explore the topic in depth previously. Make sure to encourage kindness towards oneself and others as the group engages with the session and acknowledge that the topic might bring up challenges. Emphasise that session's aim is not to bring up guilt or shame, but to engage in reflection that will contribute to more awareness, wellbeing, resilience and ability to take care of and empower one another and ourselves.

Reactions of shame and guilt might arise - encourage participants to embrace them as much as possible and normalise them, as something we are conditioned into.

Only do the session with a group in which there is enough of a sense of trust to engage with challenging conversations.

**Related material to support framing:**

- MLC Curriculum Part One - ESM & Transversal Organising Module 5: Working with power and inequalities within our movements
- Processwork methodology and derived from Arnold's Mindell's book "Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity."

**FACILITATION:**

Step 1. Introducing the theory (15 - 20)

Emphasise strongly the purpose of talking about rank: to build deeper connections with oneself and others and transform unhelpful dynamics that limit group potential rather than contributing to group development and resilience.

Explain the theory of rank, drawing on some of the material above, giving clear definitions of privilege and rank, and the difference between them. Give lots of examples from your own experience and make space for questions and comments from the group. If it's new, the subject can be tricky to grapple with. It's not about people 'getting it right' - invite curiosity and questioning as much as possible.

Some essential points to make would be:

- Rank is a conscious or unconscious social and personal ability/power that comes from culture/society, community support, personal strength and spiritual power
- Rank is fluid, it changes. There are different kinds of rank
- Some rank is unearned (being a certain sex, race, class, ...)
- Some rank is earned (accomplishments, service performed, inner work)
- You can't hide rank. We sense one another's rank through body language, communication styles, ways of relating etc
- Usually we are unaware of our high rank, but aware of areas where we have lower rank than others.

Reiterate the purpose of talking about this, acknowledging that it might be hard to talk about the power we hold as individuals and emphasise that power in itself is neutral - it's what we do about it and how we use it that matters!

#### Step 2. Individual reflection (15)

Give the instructions:

- You'll have approximately 10 minutes to reflect on some questions I will give you. I will write the questions up on a flipchart as we go along.
- As you reflect, use the medium of writing/journaling to support you.
- Think of a specific group context - it can be a historical context or a context you are in currently - and then answer the following questions:

1. What are some of my high ranks in the 4 areas described previously (social, contextual, psychological, spiritual?) (5)
2. How does my rank show up? (5)
3. How do I use this power/influence? Is it conscious? (5)

Give them each question at 5 minute intervals (if you want to give them more time you can), then bring the group back together.

Write text

### Step 3. Group exploration (50)

Invite participants to form groups of 4 (can be random, though the more diverse the groups will be, the more interesting the conversations). They will work in the groups for around 45 minutes, exploring the topic of rank.

- Once in their groups, give the instructions:

- Each person will take 10 minutes being the focus of the conversation, the rest of the group will support them in their reflection through asking questions
- Each person chooses one area where they have high rank and tells their group:
  - What is this area in which they hold high rank?
  - What are the risks and how could they abuse their power in that group?
  - How might they use it for the good of the whole in the specific group context they are thinking of?
- The rest of the group asks open ended questions that will support the focus person to go deeper in their reflection. Try to refrain from giving advice or sharing your experience and stay curious about the other person!

Ensure you have the questions written up and visible for the groups.

Keep an eye on the groups and make sure you remind them to move to the next person after each 10 minute slot. Bring people back together for the debrief.

### Step 4. Debriefing the activity (15)

Allow space for people to share how it was for them to engage with the topics in the whole session.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- How was it to reflect on the topic of rank?
- How was it to share this with others? How was it to listen to other people's reflections and support them in the exploration?
- What has the session brought up?
- What else?

Acknowledge that ideally it would require much more time and that this is work they might choose to continue on their own. This kind of exercise can also be done in a group which works together. Invite participants to form groups of 4 (can be random, though the more diverse the groups will be, the more in

### *Conclusion and take aways*

Holding power, privilege and rank often makes us feel guilty and ashamed, especially in social justice circles. Being able to shift our thinking about the power we hold from contracting, shameful attitudes towards a more open/neutral thinking about power as a resource we can use for the good of the whole or abuse if we are not aware of it and not handling it with skill, is a key competence to

support the growth of our movements resilience and effectiveness - we want them and each other to be powerful!

Ideally these kinds of exploration would be an ongoing process in our groups and movements - it is never 'done'.

Exploring the topics of power and privilege requires trust building, emotional awareness and courage!

**SOURCE:** Ulex Project, building on the framework from Arnold's Mindell's book "Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity."