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chapter 3 Modes of Power

Interests and difference

Having attempted to clarify some of the theoretical issues surrounding the nature of power, the key question to be addressed in this chapter is: how is power exercised and experienced? This will precede a more detailed consideration of the contexts within which power relations are played out (Chapter 4). It is clearly a matter of some relevance that power and its relationships can be differentiated, notwithstanding Parsons's (1969) view that this is unnecessary. Any attempt to operationalize the concept, that is, to provide a 'definition-in-use', must consider the characteristics which determine its exercise in specific settings.

Lukes, for example, relates the exercise of power to the concept of 'interests'; in other words, power relationships will depend on the perceptions of the actors concerned with regard to how these will serve their own purposes: 'talk of interests provides a licence for the making of normative judgements of a moral and political character' (Lukes, 1974, p. 34).

Bachrach and Baratz also underline the importance of 'interests' in the exercise of power in setting out a framework for the analysis of political decision-making. For them, the exercise of power depends firstly on a conflict of interests and subsequently on the acquiescence of one party to another's wishes. According to them, interests are not only expressed directly in this way, but also by control of the decision-making context. It is possible, thus, to argue that dominant interests are reflected even in the absence of concrete outcomes:

> The other side of the coin is *non*decision-making. When the dominant values, the accepted rules of the game, the existing power relations among groups, and the instruments of force, singly or in combination, effectively prevent certain grievances from developing into full-fledged issues which call for decisions, it can be said that a nondecision-making situation exists. (Bachrach and Baratz, 1969, p. 109)

The ability to set the terms of discussion and effectively to rule out certain issues from the agenda elaborated here shares much in common with the Gramscian notion of hegemony. According to this view, social structures and processes are infused with an understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, thereby creating the appearance of consensus and denying the legitimacy of alternative perspectives (Gramsci, 1971). Certainly Lukes feels that this is an important consideration in the context of the exercise of power:

> *A* may exercise power over *B* by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? (Lukes, 1974, p. 23)

The possibility seems to be that people may not only be persuaded to act against their own interests but actually to espouse aspirations and beliefs which are also not consistent with their own well-being.

practice illustration 3.1

Hidden pressures?

Amy, an older person with dementia, wants to remain in the familiar surroundings of her own home. Her relatives, however, appear keen for her to be somewhere 'safe'.

Apparently, under some pressure, in the presence of other family members, Amy comments that she does not want to be a 'burden' to anyone. When you see her alone, however, she is obviously very worried about having to move away from familiar surroundings.

Her family continually emphasize their concern for her 'safety', but appear less interested in other aspects of her well-being.

It is quite possible that Amy has been influenced both by tacit pressure from her relatives and by her own beliefs about her own self-worth as a woman and as an older person.

Whether or not the contentious notion of 'false consciousness' is sustainable, there is no doubt that the task of identifying and articulating the 'real' interests of service users is a key issue for social work practice (Rojek *et al.*, 1988). It is clear that in many practice settings

there are significant challenges in gaining a reliable view of someone's best interests, particularly where these are subject to external influences. These problems are likely to arise in the context where abusive relationships exist, for example. Feelings of powerlessness and personal inadequacy may well have an impact on an individual's perceptions of what is desirable and achievable in a situation where he or she is experiencing oppression; in turn, these feelings may be induced or reinforced by the oppressive behaviour itself.

The importance of understanding the relationship between power and interests also highlights the need to acknowledge and incorporate the idea of 'difference' into our analysis. Interests do not become problematic until they encounter opposition from other perspectives, where competing needs and wishes are evident. Underlying these conflicts, there are likely to be substantive differences between the groups or individuals involved. These may be reflected in recognized variations in their characteristics, such as race, gender, disability or sexuality. They may also be a product of different personal or professional status; and they may originate from specific features of their individual relationships.

In such circumstances, the way in which conflicts are dealt with necessarily depends on the resolution of the power relationships between those concerned. Understanding the nature of 'difference' and its implications for the exercise of power is thus an important prerequisite for practice in social work settings.

In order to make sense of the questions arising from these important aspects of the subject, it will help to develop a more detailed analysis of the various 'modes' of power which may be identified. I want to suggest that there is value in attempting to distinguish different aspects of power relationships which will help us to give substance and depth to the concept. For present purposes, these are characterized as *personal*, *positional* or *relational*. As the term indicates, the 'personal' aspect relates to the characteristics attributed to people, such as sexuality or class position; 'positional' qualities of power relations derive from the structural location of those involved in a given interaction; and 'relational' features derive from intrinsic qualities of the relationship, such as the dynamics between family members, or the influence arising from peer pressure. While these aspects of power are separated here for analytical purposes, clearly they are likely to interact in practice.

The 'personal' aspect of power: the role of identity

At the core of our social relationships lies the sense of identity. In other words, who we believe we are is fundamentally influential in

determining how we relate to others. Equally, of course, how we are treated may depend on others' attribution of a particular identity or identities to us. Identity therefore involves the generation of a set of characteristics by which, on the one hand, we categorize ourselves, and, on the other, the identification of qualities and attributes which are associated with those who are 'not one of us' (Garland, 2001, p. 137).

Robinson (1998) draws attention to the importance of the creation of shared meanings in the establishment of 'positive social identities'. A common language, for example, is an important element in the creation of a sense of group membership. Physical attributes, too, such as skin colour, may provide the basis for positive affirmation of one's sense of self. However, as theorists such as Dominelli (2004) and Garland (2001) have argued, the issue of identity is also closely connected with 'othering' processes. Indeed, this seems to lie at the core of the establishment of difference and potential conflict:

> The 'self' exists because there is an 'other' to whom one can compare oneself. The self–other dichotomy or binary dyad enables the self to externalize the 'other', and facilitates the act of viewing the 'other' in an antagonistic and hierarchical relationship to itself. (Dominelli, 2004, p. 76)

As Thompson (2003a, p. 28) points out, the act of 'identifying a difference' leads to the creation of boundaries. Such boundaries are created through the assumptions, beliefs and actions of both the self and the other. It is suggested further that these very basic features of the establishment of a sense of identity themselves contribute to the creation of unequal and hierarchical relationships. Negative perceptions and routine stereotyping can thus be seen as entirely predictable. The consequences are clear, in terms of labelling (see, for example, Becker, 1963) and the development of explicit distinctions between categories such as 'deserving' and 'undeserving', or 'desirable' and 'undesirable' (Dominelli, 2004, p. 76). The process of negative attribution can be seen to achieve two linked objectives; that is, it reinforces the sense of membership and social value of the group to which the self belongs, and, at the same time, it also underlines the negative value associated with those who are seen as 'not one of us'. In this way, divisions based on assumptions about identity become increasingly impermeable, and more likely to be sustained over time, even in the light of contrary evidence.

Dominelli (2004) expresses real concern about the implications of this kind of process for social work: 'Unitary conceptualizations of identity are extremely powerful and deeply embedded in social work. All women, black people, older people, are treated as if they were like

all others in their particular category' (Dominelli, 2004, p. 78). This, it is argued, leads to a number of partial assumptions which have adversely affected practice. Individual characteristics come to be identified as representing membership of a particular group, which then determines the nature of the practitioner's response. These characteristics override other aspects of the individual's identity, and, at the same time, they are seen as 'fixed and immutable'. Practitioners tend to 'think about identity as something that an individual acquires at birth and sticks with until death' (Dominelli, 2004, p. 77). Not only are people expected to behave in a certain way, in accordance with their ascribed identity, but also they may be misperceived by professionals if they do not comply with these expectations. By contrast, Dominelli argues, identity needs to be seen as a much more fluid and emergent concept, arising from social interactions and reflecting both individual and group dimensions. Identity formation is held to be 'dialogical', based on the nature and content of exchanges with others. It is also to be seen as a *conscious* process, whereby people draw on 'available discourses' to establish a sense of self, and to establish the nature of their relationships to others. This means that interactions, say between professionals and service users, will partly be influenced by those 'identity attributes' which each participant chooses to reveal (*ibid.*). Interpreting what may be seen as secretive or dishonest behaviour thus becomes a more complex task, given that it may be readily understandable for people to seek to present a socially acceptable view of themselves and their actions in dealing with representatives of officialdom (see Chapter 7).

Lukes has probed the concept of identity somewhat further in his attempt to link it to the analysis of power. He argues, for example, that it is important to relate identity to the idea of human nature and to consider the role of identity in creating people's 'natures'. In his view, this argument leads to a rather more complex understanding of identity than that which sees our distinctive human qualities arising simply as a product of 'practical reason and sociability' (Lukes, 2005, p. 118). Indeed, the notion of identity is best seen as representing the intersection of two separate dimensions: the distinction between individual and group identities, and the question of whether it is self-defined or ascribed by others: 'We speak today of individual and collective *identities* – and thereby neatly express ambivalence over whether the nature of individuals and groups is objectively given or subjectively, and inter-subjectively, constructed' (*ibid.*). As he points out, the term is used both in the sense of attempting to apply an objective measure of the defining characteristics of individuals and groups, and in the sense of achieving a sense of our own being through a process of 'self-discovery and self-invention'.

It is precisely because identity can be constructed in these different ways that the exercise of power in this context can also be seen as multifaceted. This may firstly be represented by the promotion of a particular image by a dominant group. The control of 'means of interpretation and communication' (Lukes, 2005, p. 120) ensures that clear and consistent messages about what is desirable are projected. As a result, certain properties and human characteristics become identified as the preferred norm. At the same time, and partly as a consequence, the characteristics of certain other groups may become marked down as less socially valued, even though they may have positive meaning for their members. This involves the rejection of certain forms of identity, including: 'the non-recognition or mis-recognition of ethnic or cultural or religious or geographical identities, which the members of subordinate and minority groups in a society endorse and to which they cleave' (Lukes, 2005, p. 119).

That is to say, identities which are held by some groups and the ways in which they are expressed may not be recognized as positive attributes by others, who may be in a position to define what is acceptable or desirable. This is well illustrated by the example of disabled children, whose identities are clearly shaped by their experience of receiving messages about what is desirable, in terms of body image and functioning. As Middleton points out, these messages are often conveyed in very direct and painful fashion. She describes the 'experience of physically disabled girls', which 'involved a great deal of physiotherapy', and whose purpose was to make their bodies conform with the image of the ideal woman (Middleton, 1999, p. 23). In another case, a young man with 'a deformed but functional hand' experienced three painful but unsuccessful operations to try to correct it (Middleton, 1999, p. 21). It is argued that the messages that disabled children receive are inconsistent, but generally present a negative or patronizing view of disability. For example:

> Consultants have the answers, and operations to make them [disabled children] normal should take precedence over social or educational needs. It does not matter if these operations hurt, or need to be repeated, or are totally ineffective. They will add to the sum of scientific knowledge. (Middleton, 1999, p. 24)

This is to be contrasted with the activities of disabled people and their organizations which have focused on encouraging a spirit of 'self-confidence and pride, rather than the guilt and shame associated with the individual tragedy model' (French and Swain, 2002, p. 395).

As well as a failure of recognition, Lukes argues that the ascription of identity can have significant consequences in terms of fixing

people into specific roles. In this way, people come to be seen, and even to see themselves, as having a particular place within the social structure. He cites the example, from another source, of widows from a particular culture, whose identity is determined in the light of their status as 'daughters, mothers, wives and widows' (Lukes, 2005, p. 119); that is, their social position is 'invariably' represented in relation to men. Thus, the exercise of power through the ascription of identity may both devalue certain groups, and, at the same time, consign people to specific positions within the social order. The clear tendency for most child care responsibilities to be undertaken by women, both domestically and in early years settings, is one manifestation of the way in which such assumptions appear to percolate the social fabric and influence the division of labour within society.

As Lukes observes, these processes do not operate solely in terms of establishing groups and assigning people to particular categories, but they also impact on the ways in which individuals negotiate their own identities. In this respect, his argument coincides with that of Dominelli (2004), to the extent that oversimplistic assumptions based on observable characteristics may result in 'unwanted recognition'. Thus: 'individuals are, in various ways and for differing reasons, disinclined to identify with some group or category ascribed to them, but are pressured into conformity, public self-ascription ... and solidarity' (Lukes, 2005, p. 119). The different dimensions of an individual's identity may be overlooked; the importance of asserting positive but undervalued aspects of one's personality may not be recognized.

practice illustration 3.2

Disempowerment and loss of 'identity'

Black and mixed heritage children and young people in care have sometimes been found to aspire to a 'white' identity, changing aspects of their appearance to conform to this apparently desirable status.

Feminists, significantly, have focused on the role of power in constructing identity (MacKenzie, 1999). In particular, they have emphasized the way in which this extends beyond an understanding of 'interests' and how these are defined, to a consideration of the ways in which they are generated. Thus, the fact that many women *want* to take up caring roles must be explained in terms of the origins of their hopes and desires, rather than simply taken at face value. The feminist argument is that this can only be explained in the context of

a historical process of systematic oppression and male domination. In this sense, compliance is secured by a process of coercion, whilst complicity is ensured through the creation of a sense that unequal gender relationships are part of the natural order of things. Such arguments can also clearly be applied to other aspects of inequality and oppression, whether based on class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion or any other difference arising from the negative classification of a particular group.

The focus on the oppressive potential of power tends to a view that identities are constructed and maintained by and in the interests of dominant groups. In other words, it may be assumed that identity merely reflects the prevailing social order. However, feminists and others (e.g. Castells, 2004) have recognized the capacity of individuals to self-consciously renegotiate and transform identity, and, in so doing, to realign power relations. Whilst some perspectives have concentrated on the personal aspects of emancipation and empowerment (MacKenzie, 1999, p. 82), others have emphasized the context of a fragmented and increasingly diffuse globalized society. Castells argues that we should see identity, and the power relationships it represents, in three distinct ways: as *legitimizing identity*, *resistance identity* or *project identity*. Legitimizing identity represents the way in which interests and perceptions of self are created by, and reflect, the interests of dominant sectors of society. Resistance identity arises out of the experience of 'otherwise unbearable oppression', and represents the rejection of negative ascriptions, for example through the affirmative expression of 'gay pride'. And, project identity is identified as a transformational state, whereby actors utilize whatever 'cultural materials are available to them' to establish a new identity and thus change social relations (Castells, 2004, p. 8).

In brief, then, identity should be seen as not merely a product of power relationships, but also as a focal point for their expression and eventual redefinition. For practitioners, the key point is that identity emerges from power dynamics, but, as a result, it is also fluid, multifaceted and capable of redefinition and change.

Positional power

As the previous section illustrates, power relationships depend in part on the identities we hold and the way in which they are constructed and change. However, power also has at least two other dimensions, which are of interest here: that which relates to the positions we occupy, and that which is experienced through the process of interaction amongst individuals and groups. These are less dependent on

the characteristics of individuals and more on their relative places in the social order.

Firstly, then, we shall consider the importance of social position. Power of this kind can be seen as consistent with the idea that it is a 'possession' or attribute, as discussed in the previous chapter. Originally, this view of power was associated with the Hobbesian idea of 'sovereignty', whereby a particularly powerful individual could impose her or his will over others (Clegg, 1989, p. 35). However, the practicalities of maintaining dominance required the development of social and political structures whereby this position of authority could be maintained:

> Order, where it is achieved, is more likely to be an accomplishment of mechanisms of discipline, which are more mediated, more formalized, and more routinized, than simply 'direct control' – someone getting others to do something they would not otherwise have done. (*ibid.*)

Historically, this process can be seen in the form of the development of relatively complex mechanisms, whereby power could be exercised as an expression of state authority. However, in the process, the loci of power also appear to have become more diffuse (Poulantzas, 1975). It may be seen as deriving from any of the following, for example: organizational position, social status, religious standing or political office. In this respect, power has a kind of formal quality, which is attached to the position rather than to the individual who holds it. In this context, too, it can be seen that there is an implicit assumption that authority and control are organized in hierarchical fashion.

Weber is probably the source most closely associated with this notion of power (Gerth and Mills, 1948), as articulated through a formal, rational system of social organization and action. Weber is concerned, firstly, with the nature of 'domination' and the ways in which this comes to be legitimized (Weber, 1948, p. 78). Without legitimacy, there is no basis for the state to exercise control over the actions of its citizens. As opposed to 'traditional' and 'charismatic' forms of domination, the modern state and its functionaries gain authority for their actions by virtue of their 'legality', that is 'by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional "competence" based on rationally created *rules*' (Weber, 1948, p. 79).

The arrangements by which these objective and impersonal rules are maintained and imposed are to be found in the development of the bureaucratic form of organization. The place of 'trained officials' within a 'fully developed bureaucracy' is to ensure the efficient and effective administration of the machinery of state in order to achieve its objectives. In this sense, the organization has no moral or political

viewpoint, but is simply concerned with carrying out its assigned tasks effectively. The standing of officials themselves follows from this, in that their duties are objectively derived from these requirements; they are therefore responsible for carrying these out systematically, consistently and impartially (see also, Parsons, 1969). The status of individual functionaries, and the power relations which derive from that, arise solely from the authority ascribed to the role of competent official. As a result, personal interests and beliefs have no influence over formal interventions in the state arena:

> it was left to the complete depersonalization of administrative management by bureaucracy and the rational systematization of law to realize the separation of public and private fully and in principle. (Weber, 1948b, p. 239)

Power within the sphere of bureaucratic activity can be said to be 'positional'. Given that, according to Weber (1948b, p. 232), the modern state is characterized by increasingly bureaucratic tendencies, then the exercise of power in this context must be of central concern. However, he also acknowledges the importance of other forms of 'domination', including by economic interests (Weber, 1978). Nevertheless, for present purposes, the recognition that status and power are ascribed to people because of their position as representatives of state bureaucracies is quite important. The authority of social work professionals is closely associated with their organizational status. Clearly, too, the extent to which the idea of bureaucracy has become discredited is likely to have implications for the acceptance (or not) of the legitimacy of their interventions.

Like Weber, Simmel is also interested in the idea of domination and the mechanisms by which it is realized. He is concerned, in particular, with the ways in which coercion and compulsion are supplanted (or supplemented) by willing obedience. Why do people do as they're told, short of being forced to comply? Where does someone's authority come from, and what gives it its 'objective' character? (Simmel, 1986, p. 205).

According to Simmel, it is possible for a 'person of superior significance or strength' to lay claim to legitimacy. In other words, by drawing on this relatively greater strength, he or she is able to ensure that his or her subjective interests achieve an objective character – they become more widely acceptable or desirable. This hints at the exercise of physical, economic or other resources, not just as a means of coercion, but in order to gain institutionalized status and recognition. But Simmel is also concerned with the way in which institutions and interests are able to bestow authority and status on individuals:

> authority may be attained in the opposite direction. A super-individual power – state, church, school, family or military organizations – clothes a person with a reputation, a dignity, a power of ultimate decision, which would never flow from his [*sic*] individuality. (*ibid.*)

As a result, the individual concerned is empowered to take action and make decisions with a degree of 'certainty and automatic recognition'. Associated with this view of authority as having a natural and logical quality, he argues that compliance depends on the 'more or less voluntary faith' of the person or people who are subject to the exercise of authority. In the absence of coercion, therefore, compliance must assume a degree of freedom on the part of the person concerned, which also leaves 'room for criticism' (Simmel, 1986, p. 206).

There are, therefore, two potential complications introduced by Simmel, which impact on the idea of the exercise of power being essentially positional or dependent on status. Firstly, as he notes, the source of an individual's status may not just be the state, but it may also derive from a number of other significant social groupings, such as the family, churches or other bodies. Secondly, by seeking voluntary compliance based on claims to legitimacy, the possibility of alternative and potentially conflicting claims must also be allowed. For the social work professional, such competing status claims may become very acute in certain circumstances, such as facing the challenge of responding effectively to young women seeking to avoid arranged marriages (Smith, 2005, p. 137). In this context, clearly, claims to authority are likely to be contested, and interventions must seek to negotiate these, rather than merely relying on the presumed legitimacy of a statutory body. Here, the idea of 'status' assumes some significance: '*Status* involves the successful realization of claims to prestige; it refers to the distribution of deference in a society' (Gerth and Mills, 1954, p. 306).

Importantly, status can be seen to derive from any of a number of attributes; these may be consistent with one another, or contradictory. For example, one's professional status as a female social worker may be inconsistent with one's ascribed position within the family or one's religion. Status and social position, therefore, are likely to be multifaceted, and this may lead to conflict, both internal and external.

In a different sense, though, status may also be transferable, so that social standing in one sphere may also give one credit in another setting. The routine assumption that business skills and experience are of value in the social care field, as in the case of the Griffiths (1988) report on community care, is one example of this kind of

transferability – significantly, it does not seem to flow in the other direction, though (see Harris, 2003)!

Power may thus be seen as a function of the status derived from a variety of intertwined social roles:

> all roles that are instituted, no matter in which order, involve authoritative relations – the family no less than the political, military, economic, and religious orders. The power of a person thus depends on a great variety of possible roles. (Gerth and Mills, 1954, p. 308)

In the practice setting, social workers must be concerned not just about the authority they derive from their place within formal organizational structures, and the legitimacy accorded to state agencies, but also about the power dynamics deriving from the status of others.

To take this further, it has been suggested that in order to understand the specific context in which status is used to exercise power, it is important to understand the basis of claims to authority or 'prestige' (Gerth and Mills, 1954, p. 315). The perspectives and attributes of all parties must be considered. From the point of view of the participant claiming authority, the factors to be considered are:

> (1) the status claim, (2) the way in which the claim is raised or expressed, (3) the basis on which the claim is raised. And correspondingly from the bestower's side: (4) the status bestowal or deference given, (5) the way in which these deferences are given, (6) the basis of the bestowal, which may or may not be the same as the basis on which the claim is raised. (*ibid.*)

Importantly, this formulation relates the notion of status to the perceptions of those concerned in any particular interaction. In this way, it becomes possible to factor in differing perspectives, and to allow for the fact that compliance may be conditional or temporary. Thus, for example, a service user's acceptance of a social worker's authority may be dependent on the professional securing a favourable outcome, such as a change in accommodation. In other words, the practitioner's claim to authority may be judged in terms of performance and results, rather than her or his ascribed professional standing.

Of course, these ambiguities open up a significant area of potential difficulty for the idea that power is derived straightforwardly from the position occupied by a particular individual. Indeed, it throws sharply into perspective the notion of legitimacy and the question of where consent derives from. The problem can be portrayed as one of ideology and the manner in which the rules and systems underpinning

organizations and social structures can be sustained. For Clegg, the issue is that the notion of 'sovereign power' becomes highly problematic, unless it can be seen to be supported by some form of ideological justification. One mechanism for the establishment and maintenance of consent is suggested by the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony', as mentioned earlier. Hegemony is typified as a process of securing the 'active consent' (Clegg, 1989, p. 160) of all parties to the continuing domination of particular sectional interests. It is a process whereby appeals to particular sectors and demands are linked under the umbrella of a carefully defined common agenda, which maintains and enhances prevailing power relations. The agents for this process are located in a wide range of settings, including welfare organizations; and, indeed, their very diversity contributes to its objective of appealing selectively to a wide range of social groups and distinct interests. Part of the effectiveness of hegemonic power is in ensuring that its forms are appropriate to the context in which it operates.

For social work, this has been a perennial matter of concern and ambiguity. The organizational and structural location of social work practitioners places them in the role of legitimate agents of state power. Indeed, for statutory social workers this is the source of their authority to act. Dominelli (2004, p. 107) argues that this aspect of social workers' activities may lead them into a position of 'regulating' the family. They are involved in a process of 'normalization', whereby certain family forms and practices are rendered acceptable, and others subject to surveillance and coercive intervention.

Whilst this aspect of social workers' officially sanctioned role may be about defining and maintaining social norms, they are also expected to promote service user interests non-judgementally (Banks, 2001). Their value commitments to empowerment and advocacy on behalf of service users appear to place them in potential conflict with the structures within which they operate (Dominelli, 2002, p. 34). This raises significant issues of concern, not just in terms of the protection of one's own employment status, but also in terms of the ability to act effectively on behalf of less powerful and disadvantaged groups and individuals.

Relational power

The third mode of power to be discussed here differs from the previous two in that it attempts to capture a sense of power as *interactive*, in the sense that it depends not on fixed characteristics, but on the relationships between individuals, groups and interests. In this sense, the ways in which it is experienced will depend very much on situational specifics, and on the precise nature of exchanges in any given

setting. Viewed in this way, it is argued, the aspects of power which derive from institutional structures and personal identity can be integrated, and thus related to the contingent aspects of relationships between social actors.

Lukes suggests that it is helpful to think of power as having a variable impact, in the sense that it may be applicable in a specific context in relation to a limited number of issues at one extreme; whilst, at the other end of the scale, power can be seen as something which 'transcends' contexts, and applies across a range of issues (Lukes, 2005, p. 79).

Some parties to the decision-making process may be said to hold 'more power' than others:

> With respect to an agent's power over a given issue, or a given set of issues, we can say that another agent's power, over that issue or set of issues, is greater if it exhibits greater contextual range, brings about further significant consequences or involves less cost to the agent. (*ibid.*)

As he points out, it is possible to argue that one person's power exceeds that of another where that individual has greater influence over a larger number of issues. Clearly, the political allocation of financial resources to social work and social care is an example of this kind of imbalance, which ultimately has a direct impact on what can and cannot be done in practice.

However, as Lukes acknowledges, comparative judgements of this nature are usually more complex, because 'most commonly, we are comparing the power of different agents over different issues' (Lukes, 2005, p. 80). In addition, the differential ability to influence outcomes may assume greater or lesser significance depending on people's subjective 'interests', for example; that is, whether or not they are affected directly.

In some respects, acknowledgement of the complexity of power relations finds an echo in postmodern analyses, which suggest that processes of fragmentation and 'de-centring' social relations have significant consequences for the nature of power itself. Bauman (1992) believes that the social milieu has changed to the extent that there has been a significant growth in the extent to which people feel themselves to have the capacity to change aspects of their lives and circumstances. This is a feature of the 'postmodern habitat', that is to say, a contemporary living environment within which rules and lifestyles are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. The nature of relationships between organizations and individuals is increasingly complex, multifaceted and indeterminate. Agencies, for example, become seen as increasingly specialized, able to exercise authority

and expertise over narrower and narrower domains. At points where different interests interact, therefore, there emerges a constant sense of 'indeterminacy', where competing claims for legitimacy and authority are played out (Bauman, 1992, p. 193). In terms of individual interactions, this widening sense of uncertainty and the provisional nature of outcomes combine to ensure that identities and relationships are continually renegotiated and recreated.

Clearly, if we are experiencing an increase in the capacity of individuals to assert their own subjective judgements, this must raise significant challenges for agencies and practitioners who claim objective justification for their interventions, given that they are likely to have to establish their credibility and authority with each new encounter, and repeatedly as their relationships with the users of services progress and change. The right to make decisions on others' behalf is therefore not 'given' but must be earned and sustained:

> As the pronouncements of the experts can be seldom put to the test by the recipients of their services, for most agents certainty about the soundness of their choices can be plausibly entertained only in the form of *trust* ... Trustworthiness, credibility and perceived sincerity become major criteria by which merchants of certainty – experts, politicians ... – are judged, approved or rejected. (Bauman, 1992, p. 200)

The nature of the relationship between practitioners and service users is therefore held to depend more and more on the ability to demonstrate qualities such as reliability, consistency and openness, than on ascribed position or legal status.

Giddens takes this line of reasoning further, by suggesting that it is not just formal relationships that are subject to this process of destabilization. The family, for example, is said to be subject to 'intense' debates about gender equality and the potential for structural change. The shift from 'traditional', patriarchal family forms to greater diversity has resulted, too, in a change in the nature of family relationships. Indeed, these trends have undermined the value of the very terms which have been used in the past, it is argued: '"Coupling" and "uncoupling" provide a more accurate description of the arena of personal life now than do "marriage and the family"' (Giddens, 1999, p. 59).

Personal relationships thus depend on the quality and nature of the 'emotional communication' between participants. The stability and permanence of the relationship comes to depend on the 'rewards' to be gained from this communication. In this way the successful personal relationship depends on many of the same qualities as those characterizing effective interactions between professionals and service

users. Thus, it is necessary to demonstrate 'active trust' by 'opening oneself up to the other' (Giddens, 1999, p. 61).

As Fook puts it, the nature of the relationship does not depend on fixed categories (such as male–female, parent–child, black–white), but also on the immediate consequences of particular situated interactions. The origins of this position lie in the postmodern concept of identity, she argues, which is seen as a fluid notion, which only gains substance in context. This is described as 'situated subjectivity', whereby 'people's own perspectives must be interpreted in the light of changing and specific situations in which they are located' (Fook, 2002, p. 74). Not only do identities vary over time, but they can also be held in parallel, with the result that they may appear, in some respects, to be contradictory. Of course, such a level of complexity in individual identity formation and maintenance can only result in an even more highly variegated pattern of interpersonal relationships.

Structural factors such as race, class and gender may be factors in identity formation, but they are not crucial in determining specific individual personalities. However, such characteristics may act as reference points, according to how people define themselves and how others may also define them. In this way, there is a degree of coherence and continuity in the maintenance of identity, which may provide some sense of consistency even in changing situations. Identity is thus negotiable without being completely arbitrary in character. Arising from this discussion, Fook argues that two important conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the idea that someone's identity can incorporate dynamic contradictions is helpful in accounting for inconsistencies of attitude and behaviour over time. It helps us to avoid making assumptions that these are necessarily fixed and unchangeable. And secondly, whilst we may be influenced by external, contextual factors, we still retain the capacity to develop and adapt within that framework:

> This idea that individuals are being constructed, but also engaged in constructing themselves at the same time, is important in a postmodern feminist ... and indeed in a critical and postmodern view. (Fook, 2002, p. 76)

This has supported attempts to reformulate the nature of social work practice, and in particular, to modify the use of power in the helping relationship. Thus, it is precisely the absence of 'positivist' certainties that free social work practitioners to 'do good in the flux of social care' (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 13). However, in order to be able to do so, social workers must be able to redefine their roles and relationships with service users. It is not simply a one-sided form of transaction with the 'expert' on one side of the table and the 'client' on the

other, receiving help in the prescribed manner, where the solution to the individual's problem is assumed to be a form of 'gift' from the knowledgeable and relatively more powerful professional to the dependent recipient. In this model of practice, 'diagnosis' and 'treatment' of problems are logical stages in the process, which depend on the skills of the expert, and in which the client is passive and has no input. By contrast, effective social work practice depends on a reformulation of this dyad, so that it represents a process of exchange. Social work needs to be seen as a 'creative fusion' of the practitioner's action with that of other participants (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 99). Objective differences of status or knowledge are not wished away, and the contextual aspects of the relationship remain relevant. It is not simply a matter of being 'non-directive', for example (Folgheraiter, 2004, p. 104). Rather, it is a bringing together of perspectives and attributes, so that mutual solutions can be devised and implemented. It is only through negotiating these differences that practitioners and service users will be able to work together to generate practical and realistic solutions. The upshot of this approach may be beneficial in several respects: a greater number of options become available; a sense of mutual empowerment may be generated; and solutions may be identified which offer a greater degree of control to service users.

It is possible to offer criticisms of this argument, to the extent that it appears to underplay the structural determinants of power and expertise. The potential for pre-existing imbalances and inequalities to be brushed aside is perhaps overstated, but the notion of 'relational power' nonetheless offers something of a counterbalance to other characterizations which emphasize its fixed and enduring qualities. For social work practitioners, this is a message of hope which identifies a space for participatory and emancipatory interventions.

main points

- Power relationships are inevitably bound up with the 'interests' of those involved
- Power can be conceptualized according to different modes: the personal, positional and relational
- The relationship between social workers and service users incorporates aspects of each of these
- The capacity to negotiate positive power relationships depends on a critical and reflexive approach to pre-existing concepts of expertise and authority
- 'Relational' practice offers one means of developing a collaborative approach to empowerment.

stop and think

- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of bureaucracy as a source of legitimacy and authority in social work practice?
- How do you think the social worker's position as a qualified professional is typically viewed by service users who may be from a different class background?
- Does this create an initial sense of distance and unequal power dynamics?
- Is 'difference' necessarily divisive?

taking it further

- Stephen Lukes has been seen as a seminal author for some time, and the second edition of *Power: A Radical View* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) offers valuable insights into the sources and dynamics of power.
- Lena Dominelli's *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) both summarizes the forms and extent of the oppressions faced by service users and provides an overview of effective practice responses.
- Franz Folgheraiter's *Relational Social Work* (Jessica Kingsley, 2004) brings an original and creative perspective to the interaction between social worker and service users, demonstrating that power dynamics need to be made explicit in order to create an effective working relationship.

Websites

http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org.uk
The Relationships Foundation is a 'think-and-do tank' which develops ideas and projects to promote positive relationship-building and seeks to demonstrate the potential of thinking 'relationally'.

http://criticalsocialwork.com
An interdisciplinary online journal dedicated to social justice which invites practitioners to question established notions of power and authority (see volume 2, 1, in particular, for significant contributions from Fook, Leonard and others).

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