

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

Monday, 12 September 2005

Topic: How do we study or do social science?

anthropology/sociology = study of human action and culture, what people do and produce

3 ways to study, different disciplines:

- biology – bodies, physiological
- psychology – development of individual mind, ego
- anthropology/sociology – more than one ego/mind, interactions, structure of relationships in interactions

***Social action is always interaction or transaction.**

Interaction and transaction are the basic data on which to build analyses. The social sciences describe and explain how interactions occur and what their products are. These interactions can develop in different directions depending on what cluster of interactions is being studied. For example:

- study of material goods = economics
- study of actions that flow from and aggregate to the State = political science
- all that is left over = anthropology/sociology

Anthropology/sociology study the **common processes that cut across different institutions**, how we build norms and how those norms become **stable patterns**, and how action under rules looks like (e.g. bureaucracy, structure of organizations).

***Social organization is a set of rules of behavior.**

Where are the spaces outside of the rules? *deviance*

And if someone violates official rules? *crime*

***Normativity vs. violation** – an aspect in social interaction involving power

history of anthropology and sociology:

- **sociology** started in the mid 19th century, coming out of philosophy as society became more complex – a focus on urban life (cities, industrial production) took into account the historical change in the organization of daily life (from living in a community of familiars to living among strangers)
- **anthropology** arose at the end of the 19th century to study the non-industrial world, the exotic and unknown
- **the two disciplines have often merged**, with large overlaps and variations within (e.g. cultural anthropology's reliance on observation and ethnographic accounts has parallels in sociology; physical and linguistic anthropology is not found in sociology, but elaborate quantitative modeling of social action is not generally found in anthropology. The settings studied (e.g. modern industrial or industrializing societies are studied by both, as are smaller scale social groups).

All social scientists have ambitions to be scientists, such that it means that they are engaged in a publicly accessible and cognitively collaborative forms of sense-making, involving observation, interpretation, and sometimes explanation of social action. Anthropological/sociological interpretation can be critical, in the sense of describing how a social situation came to be, what functions and interests it serves, and what alternatives are not pursued.

In general, Anthropology/sociology vs. economics/political sciences

Anthropology/sociology notice, record, and explain how social forces shape human experience without claiming a basic preference for one form of organization over another, or claiming one guiding telos (purpose) to social life. Economics (classical and neo-classical economics), in contrast for example, claims that maximizing utility is both the basic human drive and is the preferable ground for organizing economies. Much American political science also begins with an underlying preference that assumes the priority and preference for democratic political systems.

At base, however, these social sciences begin from the premise that social forces are collectively produced – they are the product of the interactions/ transactions of individuals and groups.

No matter how personal our experiences or sense of individual, we are always acting in a context that shapes/frames our capacity to act and our perspective, interpretations of actions.

The sociological imagination (W. Wright Mills) – the ability to see social forces operating, to grasp the simultaneous intersection of *biography and history*, to see how they are mutually constituted.

Excerpt quoted from Mills, to the effect that:

Modern persons are characterized by a **sense of constraint**.

People feel their lives are a series of traps and constraints and that they can't overcome their problems. They feel restrained by forces they don't make or control. What people do (or feel they can do) is bounded by personal outlook and expectations.

In other arenas such as the market, people move vicariously or remain spectators. But one can track the system, and by knowing the restraints, one can find fissures within which to work.

For example, process of industrialization (as referred to by academics vs. the lived experience) is transforms the peasant into a worker. But the peasant/worker does not label him/herself, the academic does.

The life of the individual and the history of society cannot be understood independently. We must look at the forces operating in situations and analyze the conjunction.

TOPIC: With this interactional, sociological framing in place, we begin to define power.

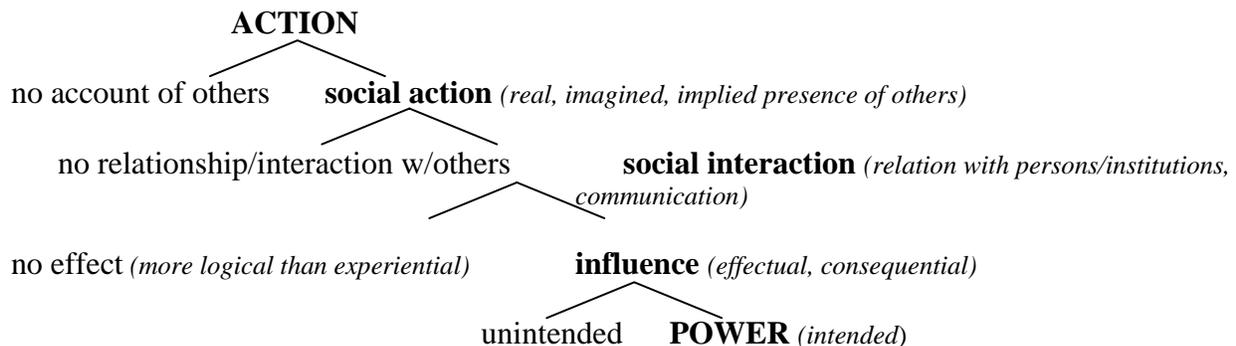
DEFINITION: ***Power is the capacity of some persons to achieve intended and foreseen effects on others.*** It is always an **interaction** and must have both **intention** and **effect/consequence**.

Power is not a possession. **One does not have power – one exercises power.** Power is a relational experience and always depends on the interaction with others.

Power is often used as a synonym for capacity, skill, or agency. It is the ability of the actor to provide a particular performance, to produce an **observable response** that was the expected/intended outcome.

Power is a *social* relation – there is the implied or actual presence of others, there is an audience. Power is not *of* or *about* the self alone – it must be exercised relationally or, at least, in an anticipated or imagined relation. One can't have “power over one's self” as is commonly said. Power is exercised only when there is a form/way of the taking account of others.

Action can be defined and elaborated:



In all social interaction, there is an effect, if only because an exchange (interaction/transaction) took place. This is probably the largest category of social action in the world. The actor exercises *influence* simply by the existence of others whose responses are anticipated, and because the actor can accommodate his/her actions to the others. Conversely, actions do not have to be directed *specifically* to the other. Power requires more than this generalized influence that exists simply because we live among others.

Dennis Wrong argues that this diffuse influence of culture and different group norms are overemphasized. This is the **oversocialized conception of social action** – it attributes too much power to diffuse social norms and groups.

Intention is the difference between influence and power. But, we must carefully differentiate individual intention from group norms. If we don't include intention as an element of the definition, then we end up with an effect without cause, power without initiation or social relation.

Example: A behavioral scientist observes neighbors A and B who live next to each other, separated by a hedge. The behavioral scientists notice that if B is working in the yard, B will immediately go into his house when A steps out. He concludes that A exercises power over B because A can make B go into B's house at any time. Later, when A is informed of this conclusion, A is surprised because A was not even aware that B was outside as well, since A was not wearing his glasses.

The conclusion that the scope of B's action is limited by A echoes Robert Dahl's notion of power, a notion that doesn't take **intention** into account: A has power over B because B's action is something that B would otherwise not do without the presence of A. The conclusion was based on the behavioral scientist's insistence that we study what is observable without recourse to meaning systems and communication.

But if A is unaware of his effect on B, is power exercised? Does A have to intend a response for it to be power? This suggests the significance of each element of the definition!

What distinguishes conscious intention? (We will later explore group intentions, and more complicated notions of institutionalized practices which can not easily be attached to intentions, but let us begin with this simple interpersonal exercises of power.)

Intentions make social science so difficult. Studying human action is difficult. When we tell a subject that they are being studied, their behavior changes!

Krugman said “Thank god I’m an economist. Sociology is so hard.” (paraphrased). Some years back, the head of the National Science Board, a chemist, argued that more money should be allocated for social science research because otherwise we would not be able to make the best uses of our science and technology.

So, why is the conclusion that A has power over B so silly? How could A have power that he did not know about? A does not know of B's existence, has no purpose, and is not organizing his action in any way to take account of B. Yet, this definition assigns power to A. This is what we mean by influence.

Dahl argued that power had to **operationalized**. (To operationalize is to specify how to measure a concept and to delineate what constitutes data that will be evidence of a concept.) He could not operationalize intention, so he simply left it out. That gives us effects without causes! A mystical world.