

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

Wednesday, 14 September 2005

TOPIC: continue elaborating definition of power as capacity to produce intended and foreseen effects on others.

Professor Silbey tells us the story of aliens observing the humans. They observe that the cars stop for traffic lights and infer that the traffic lights are totems -- causal artifacts. This goes to show how **observable behavior can be misleading** because it doesn't include the whole story. Something about how people think must be included!

***Power is enacted and exercised rather than owned.**

Reviewing exercises class completed on first day of the course. Examples of power.

For example, a senator votes with the president in order to obtain future favors. But we don't know what the president thinks – and we need to know the response to be able to discern whether or not power was exercised.

How can we reliably discern someone's **motivations**? What can we learn from just observing? We must situate the subject in a **universe of forces** within which the person acts. But Dahl argued that it is unreliable to go into people's heads, to try and mete out motivations.

Example: A random man stands on the side of the road and commands that the cars drive on the right side of the road. The cars do, of course, but not because of the man. In another instance, a policeman stands in the road and directs traffic, and the cars follow his commands.

This traffic example is a reversal of the earlier senator example. But what is the difference between the policeman and the random man? We must recognize the difference between **correlation and causation**: Rules of the road are independent of the random man's behavior. But the policeman has authority and people fear his threat. *Here we've gotten inside people's heads.*

There are several elements here:

First, using Dahl's conceptual language, A's (policeman) power has a source/base, **set of resources open to exploitation**. The different resources of power manifest in different forms. Because power derives from resources (capacity to achieve effects), A's range/scope of power is **limited to the specific arena in which his/her resources play/exist**.

Second, we have information about the intentions of the **power holder** and the state of the **object of power** – the drivers of the cars. The objects of power (drivers) are influenced by the policeman because they know something about the police; they have information and experience that frames the observable behavior. They know that if they do not follow the policeman's instructions, sanctions may follow. The uniform, the raised hand, the placement of the policeman in the traffic intersection all communicate to the driver information that then leads to the car stopping.

If we strictly adhere to and deploy the **formal (behavioral, non-cognitive) model of power**, we

end up ignoring what people think, or more precisely that people *can* think, and then we simply get silly results – **effects without causation**. For example, there is no power in the traffic light itself, the *power is from conventional learned habits*. Highway code had become habituated and drivers act in terms of that highway code. There is not particular authority in the person standing in the road, stopping traffic. There is, however, institutionalized authority in the police, signaled by the uniform etc.

*Must understand that people have knowledge of the world in which they live.

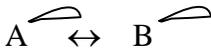
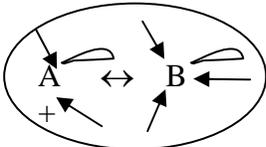
The police wear a uniform which is part of an institution which is part of the general norm of law obedience. He exercises power on the basis of rules – he is **not powerful because he is an individual, but because he is an embodied symbol** (wearing the uniform, which is an extension of the institution of Law).

*Action, intention, and cultural rules all must be considered to provide **context of social action**.

As for **tacit knowledge** and background rules – to what extent are they causes of action?

There are **three levels of analysis**:

- observable behavior
 - what subjects think, “get inside people's heads”
 - the culture in which the situation is embedded, informing what people do
- Dahl (political scientists) studied New Haven community, concluding it was a **pluralist** society of districted, power-sharing among different groups/ sectors of the community.
- Hunter (sociologist) studied an Atlanta community and asked subjects who holds power and he concluded that there was a **power-elite**. He is considered to be part of a critical /progressive strand of scholarship (along with Mills, Domhoff, Block, others) because he found/commented on inequality in the distribution of power.

<u>interaction + context</u>	<u>implication</u>	<u>theorist</u>	<u>idea</u>
A ↔ B	justify existing arrangements	Wrong, Dahl	only the interaction
	critical/progress	Hunter, Mills	interaction + thoughts
		Lukes, Foucault	interaction + thoughts social forces

1970s saw emergence of more scholarship that argued that people often defer the power of others through a **culture that enables power through diffuse institutional resources**.

Other examples from exercises:

e.g. In 1968-1970, Draper Laboratory was evicted from the MIT campus in response to student protest. Students had more resources in the immediate context (publicity and physical bodies sitting in president's office, ability to disrupt institution, so they were the ones to exercise the power. Did they get what they wanted in the long run? Military research continues, next to campus, without university oversight. Who won?

e.g. A professor fails a student because the student turns in a paper late after explicitly being told late papers would not be accepted. The professor uses deadlines to discipline rather than punish, uses the threat of a grade in order to teach the student to work. Even though the student fails, the professor accomplishes some, but not all, of what she wanted.

The examples beg the question: *does there have to be change for there to be power?*

The definition of power thus far has been to **achieve intended and foreseen effects**. In the long run, this allows for **institutionalization** that ensures that rules and discipline persist.

Max Weber – (1864-1920) German social theorist who studied **intention and motive** from “close-up to further out” offered us a means of studying human motivation and intention.

Weber's theory of *Verstehen* - "understanding"

- action results from anticipating or imagining others, how we take things into account
- in order to find out what is communicated, we must get into people's heads... But do we actually need to get into their heads or into the circumstances of their lives?
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- Weber suggests two approaches to studying social action:
 1. **Observe the action and understand it in the immediate situation without context.** For example, we infer anger from a facial expression or that a man is a woodcutter from his bodily movement/action. Dahl offers this understanding
 2. **Explain human action** – and this is what occupies anthropology/sociology. Meaning is always attached – **the meaning of action is related to the motives.** The motive can be understood by *putting the action in a context.* For example, does it make a difference if the woodcutter is cutting the wood for wage labor, his own use for heat, exercise for body building, or release of anger? There is a "**knowable sequence of motivation**" which explains the actual course of behavior. Intention can be understood from this sequence.

Social action means that we must attach meaning. The "**aboutness**" of **social action** is key to human consciousness and a contextual understanding of interactions. *Verstehen* describes the **point of view** of the person - not as an attitude or opinion - but as an action situated in a sequence of activities that constitute the scene or context being studied. *Verstehen* can elucidate varieties of power and relationships.

Georg Simmel – (1858-1918) German social theorist considered the founder of modern sociology, contemporary of Weber, a mixed legacy

- **Reductionism.** Society is the **sum of all interactions** and interdependencies such that social action can be cut down to the smallest unit of an interaction. This is an example of **micro-sociology**, people in relation to each other.
- **Relationism** All social life is **interdependent**, that it is a function of the interaction of the parts, a function of the relations of one to another.

There are **latent forms of social action** – things that aren't recognized or have terms in everyday life (e.g. in/out group). Urban social action - *city* - can be understood to be composed of a greater number of interactions, of shorter duration, in a more circumscribed geographic space.

Simmel emphasized the interaction – he had an **interactionist perspective** but no theory of how society works on the whole, no **macro-sociology**. He was thus criticized for being too psychological.

He used the terms *superordination* and *subordination* to illustrate the dyadic power interaction. Power conceals a transaction that transforms pure one-sidedness into a relational interaction. Simmel emphasized that power is never one-sided and must be understood in relation to the actions of both parties.

Thus he emphasized the **fallacy of separateness** -- the idea that power can be used/ transmitted

but not received. Rather, power is part of an exchange; it is exercised in relationship to others, *not* possessed. This fallacy is a failure to recognize the **interdependency** between the actors in the interaction. Both actors (one in the position of superordination, the other in subordination) **make some contribution and bring resources to the interaction**. The exercise of power occurs when **one actor uses more resources than the other**. The less powerful has had some choice, some participation in his/her subordination. This is the unhappy observation, for some, of Simmel's analysis. It can be an empowering insight, nonetheless. We take that up next time. Importantly, though, we need make or assign no necessary value judgment to this analysis. It is neither necessarily good nor bad, empowering nor disempowering.