

Power, ethics and youth work

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the meaning of power in the context of youth work. It proposes a theory of power in which power is seen as a mutual relation, and power is given up, or "ceded" to another person. Primally, this is a relation of cooperation, but can be, and often is, corrupt or oppressive. The paper explores this view, and extrapolates from the theory ideas of what common ethical terms like "empowerment", "dependency", corruption" and "exploitation" might mean in the context of youth work practice.

Introduction

The question of power is one of the most fundamental in any study of human relations. As such, it has rightly occupied the attentions of political philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and others concerned with human relations. At times, the question has been a sleeper: there, but taken for granted, inactive. At times, theorists have traded on a kind of uneasy consensus about a proper understanding of the origin and process of power. At times, the question has been thrown into stark debate.

In the present, the growing impact of post-modernism and post-structuralism in social theory has raised the question again. Centrally, the challenge has been concerned with understanding the structures of power not at the level of the formal structures of the State, or of other clearly defined social institutions with formally constituted processes of power and domination. Rather, the interest has shifted to the level of the informal processes of everyday life: the family, shopping, the parking inspector, sitting in classrooms. For Foucault especially,

"power comes from below... there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix ... One must suppose rather that the manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, in limited groups and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole".

Foucault 1978: 94

For Foucault and others, power becomes diffused throughout the whole network of social relationships, with every relation a source of processes of domination and subordination, established and confirmed in the construction of discourse, of language. Power has no centre. It flourishes and reproduces itself in the patterns of the most ordinary interactions between people, the most taken for granted conversations, the shape of buildings and the layout of rooms, the conventions about who sits where at the dinner table.

It is clear that this notion has much to commend it. The move away from an understanding of power as belonging to individuals or institutions, as constituted in rules and laws, as originating at the top and being diffused through to the bottom, and where one party "has" the power and another "has not" enriches our understanding immeasurably. The notion of power as constituted in relations and processes rather than institutions sends us off to look for the exercise of power in rather interesting places.

However, there are some limitations in Foucault's approach. He doesn't define power, for one thing, restricting himself to the analysis and description of its processes. In the seminal passages in *The history of sexuality: an introduction*, Foucault just uses a

synonym, " force relations". Beyond this, he describes the *techniques* and *operations* of power with great insight, but does not look for the beast that is making the tracks.

The second problem is a practical one. If "power is everywhere" (Foucault 1978:93), if domination is everywhere, then it is nowhere. The analysis of power collapses into murk, the panoply of voices. As a result, the language of power loses its moral force, the discussion of power loses its point. The notions of consent, of democracy, of oppression, of corruption lose their vitality and, indeed, become meaningless. It is no longer clear "what is to be done". Foucault would argue that every exercise in "what is to be done" is an exercise in power, in domination, and that the quest for knowledge about power is a quest for power over power. If that is true, and I think it is, it is a quest that is embarked upon with clear consciousness of one's position in the play of power that is going on even in the process of discussing what power is. But if you want to play the game (and the position of youth workers gives them no choice) some clear conception of the bottom lines, at least the ethical lines, seems important. Especially if you want to change a power relation, you have to know who to knock off.

In this context, then, the notion of power needs to be reconstructed. The classical notions of legitimacy, of consent, of force, of authority, need their grounding in a clear understanding of the basis and practice of power. Such a notion needs to be able to deal with the reality that power can be gained by force of personality, even where there are no formal structures of authority - and indeed where such structures are eschewed. The power of the State, and the power of my mother, need somehow to be worked within a common concept.

One of the things that Foucault makes very clear is that power is not something that the dominant "have", to be exercised over the subordinate. The subordinate do not merely and passively obey. There is a complex mutual relation in play in which the subordinate are as active in constructing the power relation as the dominant. *A practice of domination must be answered by a practice of subordination.* The existence of rule depends on compliance. The subordinate *cooperate* with the dominant in a power system, though often not quite as the dominant would like. Logically, the ruled could withdraw their cooperation, and the rulers would no longer be rulers. The structure of power would lapse.

In this formulation, the standard understanding of who "allows" and who "is allowed" to act is turned on its head. The ruled *allow* the rulers to act in certain ways by continuing to comply. If they were to withhold their compliance, the ruler would be unable to act. It is important to think through the mechanism by which this power relation is constituted.

One approach is to the idea of *mandate*. In this understanding, at its simplest, the relation of power involves one party (me, say) *ceding* to another (you, say) the *mandate* to act on his/her behalf. As such, it involves me being prepared to comply or cooperate with your actions, exercised, as they were, in my name. **This relation of cession is the primary power relation.** I allow you to manage my accounts, to represent me on the committee, to work on my car. As such, by handing over my power to act on these matters to you, I subject myself to you - to your judgements, your priorities. Within the limited scope of the matter in question, I give you my power. The amount of power you get is a function of the number of matters over which I give you a mandate, and how strategic these matters are.

In the social context, this relation is multiplied. Collective action is stronger than individual action. When more than two people are involved, the agreement to cede power is often made cooperatively. Together, we allow someone (Rex, say) to act on behalf of all of us.

It can be easily seen that such an agreement is more weighty than an agreement between me and you. If five of us agree together to give Rex a mandate to manage our finances, say, then Rex wields the collective force of five of us, rather than just one. I may decide that I want to withdraw from the agreement, and no longer put my money in the fund or take any responsibility for what happens with the fund. But in doing so, I face Rex, and behind him, four other people. If my action is not supported, I face them alone, and may face other penalties rather than merely the loss of the advantages of cooperative financing. The amount of power Rex gets is a function of the number of subjects who cede him a mandate.

In this view, then, **Power is a relation in which one party cedes to another the mandate to act on their behalf.** We could call the people who cede their power a *constituency*, and the person(s) to whom a mandate is given a *delegate*.

A number of things follow from this sort of explanation.

First, power relations are not necessarily evil or destructive, but are usually necessary for cooperative living or cooperative action. Even the simplest level of cooperative action, such as the division of labour, involves a devolution of power.

Second, most of the power relations that I am involved in have never been the subject of a conscious choice. Many of them were relations that I was born into. Most of them are, indeed, invisible to me - or rather, I am blind and deaf to them. It is only when I become aware of them that I am placed in a position of choice. This does not alter the fact that they are still power relations in which I actively participate whether as dominant or subordinate, whether as authority or subject.

Third, no person is powerless. Each person has at least the power of action that a human being has, and can cede or not cede their power to some other. At any point, a person may withdraw the mandate given to others to act on their behalf, whether that power has been handed over willingly or unwillingly. It may be that the other person may indeed carry out whatever threat or damage, even to the point of death, but a mandate cannot be taken or stolen. It must be given, it must be ceded. I may be drugged, restrained, imprisoned so that I cannot carry out my will to (for example) leave or speak, but I cannot be forced to stay or remain silent. I can be immobilised, but I cannot be deprived of my own power. Each person has the power of at least one human being.

Fourth, a given individual may wield many times the power of one human being within a given sphere, or *scope*, of activity. Rex wields the power of five human

beings in the sphere of control of finances. The head of state of a large country may wield the power of many millions of people in a rather broader but not limitless scope of activity. The amount of power an individual has is a function of the number of people who have ceded power and the range of spheres of activity over which a mandate has been ceded. It is difficult, as a person with a small constituency or even only the power of one, to face a person with a large constituency and scope, and the collateral penalties involved in such a confrontation can be severe.

Fifth, there is such a thing as *perceived power* here. A delegate may have a small constituency and scope, or even no constituency at all, but if I believe that they do, I may well defer to them. One example of this is that person in the committee meeting who you are unaccountably frightened of, and always let get away with things and you don't know why, and then you realise that they are exactly the same kind of person as your father. And your father had, at least as perception, the whole world standing at his shoulder and facing you.

Sixth, it is not necessary to the power relation that a mandate be ceded willingly or voluntarily. Rex may have blackmailed me, or he may have threatened to bash me if I did not vote for him. Under the circumstances, it might be prudent for me to cede, but it is still me who cedes. All that is required for the power relationship to exist is that I cede. It is a *de facto* thing. If I allow a situation to exist and continue, I maintain the power relation, and will do so until I actively withdraw my mandate. I do not even have to be aware that the power relation exists, that I have ceded anything, that I had anything to cede. Rex's family might have always managed the finances for my family, and it might never occur to me that it could be otherwise. There might be all sorts of stories that we tell which imply that their managing the finances is natural and non-negotiable. Nevertheless, as long as I comply, as long as my money stays in the fund, I cede my power.

Seventh, structures of power (such as hierarchy) work to aggregate the constituency and scope of activity, and to "naturalise" and stabilise the cession of power. Force or threats of force can be used to achieve compliance, but it is an expensive tool because it makes the exercise of power continuously visible. Measures which construct consent, or hide the power relationship from view, are much more economical.

Ethical considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations which might be usefully clarified by this approach. A relation is **coercive** when a penalty is threatened or implied for not entering into a contract, where compliance has been gained through "force or fraud", rather than given willingly. A power relation is **legitimate** where power has been ceded voluntarily and without coercion.

Corruption is when a youth worker uses the power given by a young person to further their own interests *to the detriment of the interests of their constituency*. Note

that altruism is not required by the theory: it is not a problem that a delegate furthers their own interests as a result of their position, or even that they do rather better than their constituents. The problem arises when a delegate acts in such a way as to maximise their own interest *at the expense of* their constituency, that the constituency does worse *because* the delegate does well.

Power corrupts because there is a natural tendency to further one's interest at the expense of the constituency. Whether we like it or not, we see our own needs, problems and solutions rather more vividly than those of someone else, and will tend to see the "neutral" solution as the one which does OK by us. So even with the best will in the world, corruption is a constant shadow for people vested with power. For this reason, checks and balances to the use of power are a necessary measure to temper the inclination to self-interest.

Oppression means that someone uses the power ceded by a constituency *against* the constituency. So when police, vested with the power to use force to uphold the law, use the instruments of force in contravention of the law, or against people who are law-abiding, that is oppression. When a university lecturer vested with power for the purpose of educating a student uses the power to gain sexual gratification in ways that undermine a student's education, that is oppression. When a youth worker uses the publicity given to him or her by virtue of working with a particularly visible group of "problem youth" in ways that push young people further out to the margins (for example, by typifying young people as "victims" or "monsters" in self-promoting publicity or fundraising drives), that is oppression.

Dependency, or the encouragement of dependency, is commonly thought to be unethical in the human services. To the extent that this is true (and it isn't always) this is because:

- The worker becomes corrupt, and meets his or her needs (including the need to feel powerful) at the expense of the constituent.
- The worker takes on too wide a scope of activity. If the client wishes to withdraw, the costs may be too high. I might not like the accommodation provided. But if I leave, will I also lose my only close human contact, my major source of information and guidance, my chief means of transport, my key to other networks and other resources?
- The scope of activity is unclear, and so the possibilities of withdrawal are unclear. We are not sure what the contract *is* any more, so how can you or I withdraw?
- The constituent, because of their dependence on the youth worker, actually *loses* knowledge of alternative delegates and the knowledge required to access them. For example, they lose contact with old friends. The constituent therefore becomes worse off.

Empowerment, on the other hand, refers to the process of making a constituent aware of the power relations that they are involved in, aware of their duties as a constituent and of the duties of their delegates. It involves working with people to help them

with the skills required to be accountable and hold their delegates accountable. So, for example, the Department for Social Security is given a mandate from the people through the Minister to provide income support for eligible people. If the Department refuses an eligible person income support (for example, because a staff member doesn't like the look of them) the person as a constituent should hold the Department accountable and require it to meet the terms of its mandate. It also involves people being aware of the risks and advantages involved in withdrawing a mandate and either transferring it to another delegate or hanging on to it myself, and having the skills to act on a decision like that. It may involve a worker acting as an **advocate** in order to offer the person support (ie a constituency) and to offset the greater power that an institution has.

Empowerment does not then simply mean making people more powerful. Giving bullies more power may not be a good thing to do. It means making constituents aware of the contracts in which they are involved, aware of the obligations of delegates to whom they have given power, and the ability to hold such delegates accountable. It means making people aware of what is theirs.

Youth work and accountable relationships

Good youth work will include a reflexive element in empowerment. In the process of making young people aware of the accountable relationships in which they are involved, youth workers, teachers and others should also make their own relationship with young people, as an **accountable relationship**, transparent.

My first encounter with the notion of youth work as an accountable relationship comes from discussion with Peter Logan, a colleague currently working in a detached youth work service in Perth. In a previous position, Logan was the coordinator of an accommodation service in which he was committed to notions of empowerment in the sense of teaching young people to work within frameworks of accountability. One of the agreements that he has with residents was that we would not bring a visitor through unless he has first phoned and asked if it was OK.

On this occasion, we had a Youth Work Studies student on placement with him. After explaining the rule, he told her that he was now going to take her through the residence without ringing first. He did, and the visit went fine: she was made welcome, and so on. They went back to the office, and he said that he would now wait for the phone call from the residents. If they did not ring and ask him about the breach, he would ring them and ask why they were not holding him to contract. More generally, it was his practice to outline very clearly what his contract was with them, and the lines of accountability to his managers through which they could appeal if they were unable to gain satisfaction from him.

Logan argues that this understanding of the youth work relationship as an **accountable relationship**, constructed in terms of power, service, and accountability, is more productive and less oppressive than the standard discourse which describes the relationship as a **trust relationship**. In it, the youth worker is clear about who the constituency is, what the ambit of the mandate is, what mutual obligations flow from the relationship. It is not necessary that the parties like each other, unless that is part of the contract. (It is, of course, a nice thing). Trust is important, as it is in any contracting situation, but there should also be clear avenues for redress if the mandate is not being fulfilled, or if the

relationship is becoming corrupt or oppressive. Young people should be trained to exercise these options.

The power that workers exercise over and on behalf of young people then is a legitimate consequence of a clear and informed mandate, not something gained through personal charm or kindness, the boundaries of which are ill-defined or invisible and subject to corruption.

This approach also illuminates that reality that youth workers operate under multiple contracts with multiple constituencies. In any given incident, the interests of a whole range of constituencies may be tapping us on the shoulder, demanding that their mandate be fulfilled. Many of these demands will be contradictory. Routinely, these will include management committees, other professionals, funding bodies, peers, the broader community, parents and others, the broader group of young people, as well as the young person concerned. Youth workers need to make decisions about where their loyalties lie in this welter of obligations and expectations. Indeed, so does youth work as a profession.

This problem bears on the whole question of what youth work is, and how it is distinguished from other legitimate and useful practices of work with young people. Perhaps the answer to this question, at least as I understand it, is that youth work as a practice gives a priority to the mandate established by young people as the primary constituency. Funding is accepted from Governments, churches and other bodies on the understanding that it will be used to operationalise this mandate, given the lack of resources available to young people to exercise on their own behalf and to pay for the advocacy that they need. Management committees, if they are to manage *youth work*, exist under the same mandate, derived from the same constituency.

Now, all sorts of other benefits may flow from the empowerment of young people, including decreased levels of crime, higher levels of school attendance and so on. Indirectly, mandates from other constituents whose interests lie in greater social order may be honestly fulfilled. And greater social order is often in the interests of the primary constituency (the young people) as well. But if a project is a *youth work* project, it accepts young people as the primary constituency, holds itself accountable to them, and will not take action which undermines the mandate given by them.

Conclusion

This discussion has moved a long way from its beginnings, and a long way from Foucault. It embraces a notion of power in which power may not be owned, but is certainly given, and in which social institutions serve to concentrate power and provide means for its exercise. It is a limited view, and subject to many of the difficulties of other contractarian positions on similar issues (like Rawls on justice, for example). In particular, the assumption of contract where no agreement has ever been made has to be dealt with cautiously.

Nevertheless, power understood as a reciprocal relation, even as a relation of cooperation, in which a constituency cedes a mandate to a delegate to act across a given ambit of issues, is useful for thinking about power and its ethical implications. It avoids an overly pessimistic view of power, but still advises caution. It provides a conceptual base for thinking through related notions like corruption and oppression. It is particularly useful in working through the implications of power in the kind of micrological situations with which youth workers and other community workers are daily confronted. Indeed, an understanding of the professional relationship, including the youth work relationship, may be opened up by an understanding of the particular kind of contract the profession involves.

References

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