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chapter 1 Why Do We Need to Think about Power?

A persistent problem

Power is an awkward and slippery concept, and it has proved highly problematic for social work both in theory and in practice. Indeed, conventional definitions illustrate the fundamental nature of the challenge. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* offers eight variations, of which three at least are directly relevant:

> the ability or capacity to do something;
> the capacity or ability to act in a particular way to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events; or physical strength or force exerted by someone … (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2005)

These are abstract and neutral properties, however, which give rise to large and challenging questions when applied to concrete situations. How does someone gain the authority to 'direct' or 'influence' others, for instance? What if this conflicts with someone else's 'capacity' to act in a particular way? Is it ever acceptable to use 'force' against someone else? Where does the authority and legitimacy to act in these ways come from? These and other related questions are of particular concern for social workers whose work typically involves negotiating the boundaries between individual freedom and choice, on the one hand, and external constraints and collective responsibilities, on the other. This may, for example, include considering the use of one's authority to 'direct' the behaviour of others by setting limits to their 'capacity to do something', such as exercising the parental role.

As a result, social workers often seem to be uncomfortable with the ambiguity of their position and responsibilities. They are reported to feel 'powerless' (Jones, 2001), acting simply as the functionaries of rigid and unfeeling legal requirements and state bureaucracies; whilst, at the same time, those with whom they work often appear to identify them as wielding very substantial influence over crucial and life-changing decisions (see, for example, Fisher *et al.*, 1986).

Not only is the operational context problematic, but it is also difficult to identify consistent underlying precepts to guide interventions. Sometimes, it appears to be necessary to take authority, to be directive and to exercise a degree of coercion (child protection and mental health are two areas of work where this may be the case – see below); but, on other occasions, the emphasis is very much on establishing a sense of mutuality and seeking to 'empower' service users (when working with people with learning difficulties, for example). The subject of power thus raises some fundamental questions about the very nature and purposes of social work. The very diverse nature of the responsibilities and functions of social workers makes it difficult to establish a generalized set of rules about how and in what circumstances, and in whose interest, authority is exercised. Social workers are expected to be able to mediate between different interests and to resolve competing demands, so it is perhaps unsurprising that there are inherent contradictions in the very statements of principle which inform their actions (General Social Care Council, 2002).

In fact, the authority of social workers derives from a number of different sources, giving rise to conflicts and choices for practitioners. Their professional standing, recently underpinned by the establishment of a national accrediting body in the UK (the General Social Care Council), offers one form of legitimacy to their work, helping to rationalize and justify the discretionary exercise of authority in complex circumstances. At the same time, law, policy and procedural rules offer another, routinized and systematized, source of justification for the exercise of mechanisms of control in situations of dispute or conflict.

A third and rather more nebulous, although arguably more important, source of authority for social work practitioners is that which derives from their personal credibility and accountability to those who use services, based on the way in which they conduct their everyday working relationships, especially with service users, but also with colleagues and other professionals. In other words, the practitioner's capacity to influence outcomes may depend on personalized attributions such as 'he or she knows what he or she is talking about'.

Other sources of legitimacy and credibility should also not be overlooked, including personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender or (dis)ability. This adds a further level of complexity, because it is not just the social worker's professional 'identity' which is crucial, but also the implications of the individual's characteristics and behaviour for the legitimacy accorded to that individual by others. So, a sense of 'difference' may effectively undermine the practitioner's credibility, leading service users to conclude that 'he or she *doesn't* know what he or she is talking about'.

practice illustration 1.1

Feeling disempowered as a practitioner

I can recall being told as a newly qualified probation worker that I could not possibly have anything to offer an alcoholic because I had not experienced that condition myself. In this way, authority bestowed on me by law and by my professional status was effectively denied on the basis of personal qualities (or lack of them).

As we shall see subsequently (Chapter 7), the role of service users themselves in determining the shape of power relationships is crucial.

Power dynamics in social work depend on the complex interplay between these different aspects of the practitioner's identity, standing and imputed authority, and those with whom the practitioner is interacting, notably service users, as well as others who may have a part to play in 'influencing' interventions.

Right from the start we will have to accept that there are no simple answers to the kind of questions to be explored here. The paradoxical and multifaceted nature of social work's relationship to power, and its power relationships, clearly represent a significant challenge.

The power to be late

Social workers may feel themselves to be driven by overwhelming operational demands, compounded by excessive workloads, staff shortages, paperwork and limited support (Jones, 2001). This may underlie the occurrence of unavoidable problems, such as lateness or even missed appointments. Nevertheless, for people in positions of relative authority, such as social workers, there may be considerable latitude, in that lateness for appointments with service users attracts little by way of negative comment or official sanction, although service users themselves stress the importance of practitioner 'punctuality' (Department of Health, 2002b). On the other hand, people in relatively weaker positions, such as service users themselves, may face rather different interpretations being placed on their 'failure' to attend appointments or meetings. Indeed, such actions may be taken as signs of indifference or inadequacy, and this may have significant consequences in terms of the judgements made about them and decisions about practice interventions.

practice illustration 1.2

The power of lateness?

The centrality of power in social work was, in fact, neatly illustrated for me by a colleague when I first told him that I was thinking of writing this book. His immediate response was to relate the term to its concrete implications rather than abstract ideas, and he framed the issue in terms of 'lateness', and the ways in which this is defined, experienced and justified. It seemed to him that power relations are expressed in the differing ways in which 'being late' is dealt with in transactions between agencies, practitioners and service users.

In his view, those in positions of formal authority are less likely to be held accountable for being late, whilst service users may find that their 'lateness' has adverse consequences for the way they are perceived or treated.

This may be a relatively mundane example, but its very ordinariness highlights the way in which power and its consequences are deeply embedded in the routines of day-to-day practice, as well as the more obvious points where authority is invoked or sanctions applied directly. In addition, the example illustrates at least three things which are of critical importance when we consider the place of power in social work. Firstly, perceptions will vary depending on an individual's position in any given transaction. That is to say, the meaning of one's actions will not always be conveyed to others as intended, and may well be interpreted in the light of differing assumptions about the relative status and authority of participants. 'Being late', for example, may be an occupational hazard for the professional concerned, but for those who are kept waiting, implicit messages are conveyed about how (un)important they are seen to be. For the service user, on the other hand, 'being late' may similarly be an inevitable consequence of problematic circumstances or limited resources, yet this may still be interpreted as a sign of irresponsibility by others whose moral judgements may have significant implications.

Secondly, the distribution of power in personal and professional relationships is likely to be perceived and experienced as unequal, even if the imbalance may not always lie in the expected direction. The relationship between a female practitioner and a male service user may incorporate a number of potentially conflicting power dynamics, for example. In general, however, the ability to prescribe

behaviour (or ascribe meanings and apply moral judgements) rests predominantly with the social worker rather than the service user.

And, thirdly, it is impossible to operate in a power vacuum. This is especially the case in the social work setting. It is important to acknowledge that social work is constantly challenged by the requirement to make decisions and to carry out interventions which may have a profound impact on the lives of service users and carers. These may be positive actions, based on the decision to provide a service, to exercise control over someone's actions, or to act to protect a vulnerable person; or they may be negative decisions, where organizational priorities require a service not to be offered, or to be removed. Crucially, however, these interventions will be influenced by the nature of the relationship between participants, and, again, this may be affected by overt behavioural indicators, such as the quality of timekeeping. In this instance, however, there may also be a consequence for the practitioner if he or she is perceived as unreliable, in terms of service users' willingness to 'cooperate' with professional decisions.

The nature of power and its exercise, then, lies at the heart of the relationship between social work practitioners and those who use services. It is a feature of mundane and routine interactions as much as it is apparent in the explicit and formal exercise of authority and control. It is clearly important that we develop a sound and thorough understanding of the concept in order to be able to bring some clarity to the challenge of establishing effective and productive power relationships in practice.

What is the place of power in social work?

Social work interventions are likely to have a profound effect on people's lives. These include the imposition of restrictions on their activities, the allocation (or denial) of resources, and the determination of their living arrangements. Inevitably, these actions are likely to have a fundamental impact on service users, and others concerned with them, such as family members and carers. There are a number of social work settings which epitomize these issues, such as the exercise of child protection responsibilities, or decisions over the hospitalization of people under mental health legislation. In other contexts, such as work with people with learning difficulties, the dilemmas of power may revolve not so much around if and when to impose constraints, but around the extent to which the autonomy of service users can be promoted.

In child protection, for example, this is clearly a context in which the social work professional is responsible for exercising critical

decisions which may involve determining the way in which families are ordered, and the conduct of relationships between family members. In other words, the social worker is cast in a role which may involve acting intrusively and authoritatively in the personal and private sphere of the family, which may conventionally be seen as inviolate. The consequence of such intervention may involve transfer of parental responsibility to the state, in the form of the local authority, and the consequent disruption of what may be seen as 'natural' ties, with both symbolic and practical consequences. The exercise of power in the formal or legal sense may appear to be decisive; but it may also give rise to further and continuing conflict and challenge (Smith, 2005).

Likewise, mental health social workers have for some time held responsibility for making crucial judgements about 'risk' and dangerousness, where the rights of service users are balanced against those of the wider family and the community. Once again, the professional obligation to evaluate complex situations, and to reach appropriate decisions, lies with the social work practitioner. The consequences of these judgements may involve invoking compulsory measures of detention. This is a major step which requires substantial justification in terms of the protection of the public (Ball and McDonald, 2002). We should note that such responsibilities are further complicated by the necessity for practitioners to take account of social and cultural factors (Davis, 1996, p. 118). Professional judgements are likely to be exercised against a backdrop of inequality and oppression, where the dynamics of power are, once again, a central issue. The problem of institutional racism, for example, has a significant bearing on the exercise of power by individual practitioners.

Turning to a third example, for people with learning difficulties, social workers may well have a central role in making judgements of a rather different character. In this context, it is the expectation placed on practitioners to determine the 'best interests' of the service user which is particularly challenging. This, in effect, generates a requirement to resolve tensions between key social work principles, such as autonomy and empowerment, on one hand, and the protection of vulnerable people, on the other. This potential conflict is particularly acute in relation to the emerging recognition of the importance of enabling people with learning difficulties to take charge of their own lives, for example by managing their own finances, and commissioning their own services through direct payments schemes.

These examples illustrate a number of recurrent themes which epitomize the kind of judgements which must be exercised in carrying out the social work task. Major considerations include the problem of competing interests, the balance between respecting wishes and

meeting needs, and the distinctions between personal autonomy and what is believed to be the common good.

Embedded in such processes are the currents of power, which are manifested through the exercise of social work responsibilities, but which are also encountered in the settings in which practice is carried out. Oppressive and abusive relationships will be encountered, for example, and will need to be challenged, but even in this context the processes involved are not likely to be straightforward. Questions of the legitimacy of the practitioner's actions will arise in parallel with complex interpersonal dynamics, and this will further compound the difficulty of exercising authority effectively. The nature of power and the manner in which it is realized will thus represent significant challenges.

The contexts of power in social work

The task of exercising authority in individual cases encompasses many of the professional challenges likely to be faced by social workers, such as the need to exercise their judgement sensitively, and make definitive decisions, with far-reaching implications for the lives of service users and those around them. Before moving on to consider the notion of professional power in more detail, however, it is important to acknowledge that the predominantly individualized nature of social work interventions sometimes obscures some of the wider considerations which must be taken into account. Relationships within a particular family, for example, will be shaped by an intersecting pattern of influences, including cultural norms, ideologies of gender, financial resources and, sometimes, physical strength. We must be ready to acknowledge that power is multifaceted and diffuse, representing a complex and diverse set of influences on interpersonal transactions.

Social work is not just concerned with direct interactions between service users, practitioners and their agencies, but it is also closely implicated in the conflicts and inequalities that characterize the contexts of interventions, including those that reflect wider forms of oppression and discrimination. As is widely acknowledged, those who use social work services are predominantly to be found amongst groups and communities who experience disadvantage, oppression or social exclusion (Dominelli, 2004). Thus, for example, discrimination on the grounds of 'race', gender, disability, sexual orientation or immigration status is a prominent feature of the lives of many of those with whom social workers practice. Inevitably, in these circumstances, the dynamics of power, control and authority are of major significance, since it is denial of their

basic human rights and lack of ability to shape their own lives which is crucial to people.

Relationships can be characterized in a number of ways. For example, they may be perceived in terms of structural positions, such as the formal role of the representative of a state agency vis-à-vis the recipient of services. But such relationships may incorporate a number of other dimensions such as the expertise attributed to a professional as opposed to a lay person; or, in another sense, the differential access to finance or other resources may also be a central aspect of a particular interaction. Indeed, we need to think of interpersonal transactions as reflecting a number of different dimensions. They may be affected by political, ideological, financial, cultural, communal or collective influences. These can each be seen to represent a distinctive 'mode' of power, with its own means of expression and dynamics. However, these should also be seen as interactive, generating a potentially limitless variety of currents and forces.

As we can see, individually based actions necessarily incorporate a number of dimensions. Social work typically takes place in settings where disadvantage and discrimination are commonly experienced. The consequences for service users may well be experienced in the form of a loss of control over key aspects of their own lives. The ambiguous nature of the social worker's role is evident. At one and the same time, the practitioner may both hold power in the form of ascribed professional expertise and statutory authority, yet at the same time be expected to promote the values of empowerment and autonomy for the service user. In addition, interventions are likely to be further circumscribed by external forces over which neither party has much control, as diverse as budgetary constraints and media stereotypes.

It must be recognized, too, that features of the social work terrain, such as formal language and standardized terminology, may also have a bearing on the interaction between practitioners and service users. Although clearly an essential basis for communication, language also incorporates implicit assumptions and judgements which may have adverse consequences for those it purports to describe. The routine use of jargon and opaque professional terms are also likely to create a sense of distance, and may effectively devalue and disempower people who use services.

It is not just that social work is complicated. It is also necessary to take account of the differential impact of the diverse forms of power on the circumstances and experience of service users. Inequality and oppression are certain to play a part in shaping their lives. Social work practice is thus obliged to engage with power imbalances in this respect. The exercise of one's responsibilities becomes a much more

complex task than merely efficient resource management or the accurate application of eligibility criteria.

Key questions about power

It is the unevenness in the sites and forms of power that leads to our next significant observation. It may be an attractive notion that power is held in measurable form by individuals or institutions, for example, that the rule of law, and the ability to exercise statutory authority, solely depend on the legitimacy accorded to agencies of the state. However, as we shall see, such assumptions can be challenged in a number of ways. The notion of authority being held in a particular place seems to underestimate the extent to which different and competing sources of legitimacy can be seen to apply.

Neither is it realistic to think of power simply as a fixed quantity, subject to processes of transfer or exchange, but incapable of changing in overall capacity. This view is held by writers from quite different theoretical traditions, such as Parsons (1969) and Poulantzas (1973). Both argue that power cannot be reduced to a 'zero sum' equation. It does not, according to this view, represent a fixed entity, whereby one group or individual can only gain at the expense of another, and to an equivalent extent: 'In short, power relations do not constitute a simple expressive totality, any more than structures or practices do; but they are complex and distorted relations' (Poulantzas, 1973, p. 113).

We can see, therefore, that the shape and nature of power vary and its dynamics are unpredictable. At the same time, the manner in which it is exercised and realized is a fundamental issue in social work assessment, decision-making and intervention. It seems that there are four key questions which must be addressed in order to provide an effective understanding of power as a central element in social work practice. Firstly, it is critically important to gain some insight into *the nature of power*, that is, can we conceptualize its essential characteristics and, if so, how? Secondly, we need to acquire an understanding of *the sources of power*, that is, where does it come from, and how is it represented in any given social work transaction? Thirdly, it is important to achieve a practical awareness of *who has access to power*, that is, what are the resources (in terms of influence and authority) available to participants in specific contexts? And fourthly, we need to know *how power can be realized*, that is to say how practice can draw on the dynamics of power in order to achieve effective outcomes, which also reflect principles of fairness, equality and social justice.

The structure and aims of this book

In attempting to provide a constructive approach to the questions set out above, this book will focus on three broad areas. Part 1 (Ideas of Power) will consider some of the theories which have been developed to account for power and the means by which it is realized. Chapter 2 will explore key questions about the meaning of power and what it consists of – for example by exploring the distinction between what Fitzpatrick (2001) refers to as 'power as quantitative capacity', that is, as a possession; or 'power as production', that is, as the outcome of a particular social process. The differing implications of these (and other) conceptualizations will be explored, and I will endeavour to illustrate these with reference to aspects of social work practice. Despite its structure, it is not the intention to maintain a rigid demarcation in the content of the book between theory and practice.

Chapter 3 will link theories of power itself to a more detailed discussion of the 'sites of power'. In this context, notions of authority and legitimacy are particularly important, as well as the distinction mentioned earlier, between 'formal' and 'real' power (Poulantzas, 1975). Clearly, for social work practitioners, the sources of legitimacy are of particular significance, especially for those working in statutory settings. The authority to act derives to a great extent from legislation and official policy, and it is important to recognize this. However, authority also derives from a number of other sources, including expert knowledge and professional organizations, which may sometimes come into conflict with formal statements of policy. It is also clear that informal understandings and mutual solidarity provide a basis for practical decision-making, when it appears necessary to act in a way which is not sanctioned by official policy. Here, too, the idea of 'resistance' (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Housley, 2003) will be considered, particularly in the light of the emerging strength of service users and the potential for them and their organizations to act as sites of power. Thus, it will become apparent that 'authority' is not the same as 'legitimacy', since the latter depends on the extent to which a range of stakeholders, including service users, accept the formal authority bestowed on practitioners by their statutory powers and professional status.

To conclude this part, we will consider some of the processes by which power is realized in practice. In order to do so, it will be important to identify the mechanisms by which legitimacy is achieved, and authority established. For example, the primacy of managerial and business-orientated approaches to service delivery (Harris, 2003) is neither inevitable, nor self-evidently justified. The impact of ideology, and its relationship to power, are of particular importance

because of the way in which the possibilities and impossibilities of practice are framed. For example, what counts as knowledge depends on dominant assumptions – sometimes referred to in terms of 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971) or 'paradigms' (Kuhn, 1970) – and this, in turn, sets the parameters for interventions. Chapter 4 will thus illustrate the importance for practitioners of retaining an awareness of alternative sources of understanding and bringing a critical edge to their work.

Part 2 (Mechanisms of Power) will offer an account of the way in which power is embedded in the operational structures of social work. Chapter 5 will consider the role of key institutions in setting the agenda for practice. Notably, the increasingly significant influence of government in speaking directly to practitioners will be considered here. However, it will also be important to reflect on other sources of influence, such as the media, judiciary and community leaders. These influences are of especial concern when we consider the circumstances of marginalized groups of service users, such as asylum seekers (Hayes and Humphries, 2004), where social work intervention takes place in a context of social exclusion and outright hostility.

Chapter 6 will consider the professional and organizational context in more detail, reflecting on the implications of recent changes for social work practitioners. Two trends, in particular, will be explored. The first is the continuing tension between professional standing and values on the one hand and the influence of procedural requirements and managerialism on the other. At issue will be the extent to which this represents a constraint on the independence of social workers, determining not just what they do, but how they do it. Implicated in this process are the burgeoning targets and performance indicators which appear to act as a distorting influence on the exercise of judgement, expertise and creativity.

At the same time, another emerging theme is the emphasis in training and service delivery on interprofessional working. Whilst this appears to be uncontentious, reflecting, as it does, a reasonable aspiration towards better communication and more effective practice, some concerns persist, as we shall see. These relate, again, to independence, and to the impact on practice of imbalances in status, resources and influence. Notwithstanding these concerns, this chapter will discuss some positive developments in this area, in terms of the enhanced authority of social work as a distinct professional discipline.

To conclude Part 2, there will be a fuller discussion of the relationship between practitioners and service users, in order to consider the challenges of exercising authority whilst at the same time promoting

the aim of empowerment. Social workers have not always appreciated the extent to which their actions are experienced as hostile and intrusive (Fisher *et al.*, 1986; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995). Chapter 7 will explore some of the challenges of incorporating this understanding into practice, and building honest, open and productive relationships. Importantly, the aim will be to incorporate the service user's perspective, offering some insight into possible strategies to renegotiate power relationships from an apparently weak position.

Part 3 (Taking, Making and Using Power) moves from earlier analyses of power structures, formal systems and organizational frameworks towards a detailed consideration of the potential for social workers to share and devolve power effectively in the interests of service users. Here, we will concentrate on the strategies and practicalities of delivering effective and empowering interventions which pursue underlying objectives of achieving outcomes which address power imbalances and promote social justice. This part will consider the implications for practice at three distinct levels: the individual; the systemic; and the structural. The aim is to demonstrate that each of these is a legitimate and, indeed, necessary focal point for social work intervention. The connectedness of power relations means, in turn, that practice must itself be integrated, seeking systems and structural solutions alongside and in concert with personal change. Chapter 8 concentrates on the importance of recognizing the negotiable nature of power relationships in practice at the individual level. This does not necessarily mean that the social worker must relinquish all claim to power or authority but, rather, involves developing appropriate and inclusive methods for evaluating and balancing 'rights' and 'risks'. It may still be necessary to exercise measures of control and coercion, but these, too, can contribute to enhancing the power and autonomy of service users themselves. This chapter also discusses the importance of approaching interventions in ways which 'factor in' the likelihood of service users' being excluded from determining just what is the problem, and what are the key questions and choices from their point of view. In short, it is about professionals being sufficiently confident in their own skills to feel able to 'let go' and adopt an inclusive approach to problem definition and resolution.

Chapter 9 takes a more systemic view of the role of social work in reshaping power relations, based on the preceding arguments that people's needs and aspirations cannot be taken out of context, and that it is often the network of relationships around them which determine their particular circumstances. A consideration of systems and ecological theories will demonstrate the potential for social work practice to use such strategies to achieve certain goals and aspirations, for example participation, advocacy and self-determination, as set out in the Codes

of Practice (GSCC, 2002). Recognizing the limitations of the 'zero sum' notion of power (Fitzpatrick, 2001) will enable social workers to consider the creative possibilities of working alongside service users and their networks to enhance their sense of autonomy and control.

Finally in Chapter 10 I will seek to pursue this theme further with a consideration of the potential role for social work in using its inherent power to promote social inclusion and social justice. This may mean reframing social work and linking individual interventions to broader strategies of social change and strengthening communities. The opportunities for developing practice along these lines will be considered here, as will the importance of seeking effective alliances with service-user and community organizations, as being part of the job of social work. This chapter will conclude by summarizing some of the strategies by which social work can deliver practice which is genuinely empowering and emancipatory (Leonard, 1997).

main points

- Power is a complex and challenging concept
- Power has a crucial impact on the relationship between social workers and service users
- Power has several dimensions, with practitioners operating at the interface between the structural and the personal
- Authority, legitimacy, and professional and personal credibility are all significant factors in the exercise of power in social work
- Social workers must be willing to take a proactive approach to considering, rethinking and changing power relationships in the interests of service users.

stop and think

- Who is oppressed/disadvantaged in a given practice setting?
- Who/what is the source of oppression?
- What form does this power imbalance take (e.g. structural, personal, financial, gender, 'race')?
- What levers are available to us (practitioners and service users) to achieve positive change in this unequal relationship (e.g. professional authority, negotiation, collective action, human rights instruments)?
- How can we generalize change to achieve collective as well as individual benefits?
- With whom can we work to achieve these goals?

taking it further

- Lena Dominelli's comprehensive account *Social Work* (Polity Press, 2004) not only provides a thorough overview of the history and state of social work, but it also sets this within a context of the persistent experiences of disadvantage and oppression facing those who use social work services.
- David Garland's *The Culture of Control* (Oxford University Press, 2001) includes an insightful critical account of the everyday processes by which certain groups and communities are marginalized and 'othered'.
- Tony Fitzpatrick's wide-ranging book *Welfare Theory: An Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) also includes a helpful framework for conceptualizing power in the context of social welfare.
- Peter Leonard's contributions to the pursuit of positive strategies for renegotiating imbalances of power and promoting social justice is a helpful antidote to the tone of pessimism which sometimes seems to infuse discussions about the inevitability of disadvantage (*Postmodern Welfare*, Sage, 1997).

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