

## Power and Social Work

This essay shall begin by defining power, then will go on to discuss Marx Weber and Parson's theories of explanations which will in turn demonstrate how and to whom power is distributed. I shall then go on to discuss how this distribution of power applies to social work and the service users.

Power and powerlessness go hand in hand as to have one the other must exist. As society is not egalitarian and never shall be, there will always be inequalities. These inequalities can be on both personal and structural levels. To enable us to understand power and social work we must firstly understand the theoretical explanation of the distribution of power, privilege, prestige and powerlessness within western society by looking at social divisions, class and their positions within society.

Marx was interested in the theories of economic development, he believed that economy was dominated by agriculture and power was held by the aristocratic landowner, in the period when manufacture was the dominant mode of production which he called the 'bourgeoisie age'. According to Marx the history of human society past and present, has been that of class struggles. There has always been a subdivision within society into different ranks, where social positions have come into grades. The 'bourgeoisie age' has been split into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Marx defined class in the term of dominant 'mode of production' and the position within the social organisation of the means of production, within industrial capitalism it was the bourgeoisie who owns the means of production and as a result exploits the proletariat who sells his labour to the owners of the means of production. The industrial middle class had created an industrial proletariat and the success of the middle class would ensure other classes would slip down into the proletariat, the lower middle class would be excluded from the bourgeoisie as they did not have enough capital to compete, this combined with the immersion of the proletariat to keep costs down was a mechanism, which would create the simple two class structure. Hence his theory that the labour process the bourgeoisie dominating and controlling the proletariat and a 'legal and political superstructure (the political system of parliament etc government was neatly characterised as 'managing the committee of bourgeoisie' this is how social stratification came about. Marx clearly believed that social stratification is an objective reality, which follows inevitably from the process of economic change.

The welfare state is a result of struggle by working class people to achieve collective benefits within the system and is accepted by capitalists because it maintains the system, which strengthens their wealth. Social workers are thus put in a contradictory position as representatives of the welfare state, they help working class people but whilst doing so maintain the power of the owners of capital.

Weber had a different analysis of the nature of classes, he allows the possibility of a multiplicity of economic classes. He found that as well as the bourgeoisie there were other intermediate groups. Weber would call these 'status' groups. Weber suggests members of status groups have certain rights, privileges (or lack of it ) and so on. These create many social classes consisting of people in different occupations, requiring different skills and qualifications, hence, it has been accepted that occupation is used in defining class. According to Weberian theory:

*"authority is the legitimate exercise of power, ie the people whom that power is exercised accept it is legitimate and therefore recognise it's authority"*

Wiles, M in Power and Social Work Lecture notes

Weber's analysis of authority is that of Tradition (customs and practices of a group i.e. the royal family). Charismatic (the possession of leadership often related to religious leaders) and Rational-Legal Authority (institutionalised) this organisation is seen as the distinguishing form of organisation and legitimate authority in industrial society. This authority comes with rights and responsibilities of office when procedures are made and followed by subordinates hence the authority does not come from the individuals or traditions of the office but the responsibilities and procedures are designated within the position itself.

Parsons the functionalist seeks to explain the structure of society, he views society as a system that is made up of a set of inter-connected parts, put together, form a whole. These parts are the institutions of society, the family, education system, political institutions etc, all of which share common goals and together work for balance and consensus and order in society.

Parsons idea was that social groups need and will co-operate with one another therefore becoming interdependent, he finds it difficult to see how members of society could effectively work and co-operate together without social inequalities. The inequalities of power serve to further collective goals based on shared values will benefit members of society and hence integrate rather than divide societies. The ranking of individuals is based on a consensual view of the importance of positions.

Today in western society class differentiation does exist and has an impact on life chances and determines how we live. The inequalities that exist are not only in class and status but also race, gender, age etc, people from these minority groups are often discriminated against and powerless. The majority of service users are those who are living in poverty and as stated in by Becker and MacPherson 1988 indicates service users are likely to be:

*'Old or young, able-bodied or with a special need, an offender, a single parent, an abused child or partner, black or white, service users are more likely to be poor and most likely to be drawn from those sections of the population which enjoy the least status, security and power.'*

Adams et al (2002) page 42

Authority is within the hierarchy of organisations, when the authority of one superior is then subordinate to the other. The bureaucracy is about rules set regulations and procedures and in turn promotes functions. Social work has seen the provision and development of new and somewhat complex structures e.g. highly developed and formalised division of labour, extensive hierarchies of command, rules and procedures, transactions are noted and recorded and that of trained officials. These try to combine specialisation with integration and co-ordinated direction whilst providing standardised services to meet the needs of the service users at the same time.

The service users may perceive the social worker as a symbol of power who holds authority from a bureaucratic state. The negative aspect of this perception could be detrimental for the service user as this may hinder communication and co-operation between the service user and the social worker, therefore identification and resolve of the service users difficulty could be adversely delayed.

Although the social worker has a degree of power within their profession, they are governed themselves by state legislation and legitimate authority, they are at times constrained by their agency as to how much power they actually have. If a service user who has been hospitalised and is now on his way to recovery but has physical impairments, therefore, requiring specialist equipment to be installed before he can return home the social worker although seeking to empower the service user cannot do so as constrained due to the lack of his/her agencies financial resources for the necessary equipment hence disempowering the service user.

The agency itself is financed and budgeted by state, this may limit resources that the social worker may eventually offer or not offer the service user. As they work as part of a bureaucratic state they must follow procedures, guidelines and policies whilst striving amongst all this to serve the service users in such a manner as to never lose sight of the fact that they are individuals who have rights that must be respected and to ensure that the service user is empowered.

## Conclusion

As social workers we are bound by the government's legislation on what we can and can not do for these individuals.

The government has made social work a profession hence giving social workers the status then the power. Social workers are conditioned and controlled by the

state as social workers are governed by the state to maintain the smooth functioning social order, in my opinion maintains the 'status quo' on behalf of the state.

Therefore social workers are in fact in alliance with the state and are instruments of state power who may at times be, themselves tied and bound by the power given to them, as stated by Harris

*"Social Workers s power is expressed not just by what they do but by what they are, and they are subject to the very power they are themselves exercising" in Davis ,M (2000) page 28*

Social workers may very well find themselves at times in a no win situation whilst they are striving to empower the service user.

## Bibliography

- Adams, R. Dominelli, L. & Payne, M (2002) *Social Work, Themes Issues and Critical Debates* Palgrave Hampshire
- Harris, R in Davis, M(2000) *Blackwell Companion* Blackwell Oxford
- Payne, M (1996) *Professional Social Work* Venture Press Birmingham
- Power and Social Work* (2003) Lecture notes University