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THE POWER OF SITUATIONS: AN APPROACH TO
UNDERSTANDING POWERLESSNESS AND OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

   Much of the difficulty people have in organizing, directing, and
coping with their lives is, perhaps, directly traceable to their lack
of awareness of, and erroneous assumptions about, the interactional con-
texts in which they seem or feel powerless. This is especially true,
but not exclusively so, of the poor and ethnic, sexual, and political
minorities. To the extent that powerlessness exists and is implicated
in the various miseries of existence, the role of social worker as
advocate, broker, counselor, or agent of change might profitably and
accurately be defined in interactional, structural terms.

   Social Work has traditionally regarded the social environment as an
important dimension of both assessment and intervention. Typically, the
impact of the environment is characterized in a "pure" sense as coming
through organizational, institutional, or community filters. It is our
view, however, that a considerable degree of the impact of the environ-
ment can be drawn as a phenomenon inherent in the countless, face-to-face
interactions that people have every day, and that make up the bulk of
ordinary life.

   It is the thesis of this essay that: (1) face-to-face situations
have powerful control on individuals' thoughts and actions and thereby
may constrict freedom; (2) elements of the common interactional context
which circumscribe thinking, feeling and action can be discovered and
have both structural (social and enduring) and psychological (personal
and transient) elements. Both structural and psychological elements of

the "power of situations" will be described and then a brief perspective on intervention offered.

Structural Elements in Interaction: The "Fact" of Society

"Society" is central to our lives. Following Emile Durkheim, Berger (1963) has suggested that it confronts us as something external to our-selves, especially in the form of controls. "Its institutions pattern our interactions and even shape our expectations. They reward us to the extent that we stay within our assigned performances. If we step out of these assignments, society has at its disposal an almost infinite variety of controlling and coercing agencies" (Berger, 1963:91). Not only is the threat of official violence employed, but also the sanctions implicit in morality, customs, and manners. Violations of the expectations woven throughout the institutional fabric bring nearly assured exclusion, sequestering, pernicious labeling and group rejection. In face-to-face interactions subtle but potent mechanisms of control operate constantly to keep individuals in line and mindful of their relative status. Included are persuasion, ridicule, gossip and shame. Even our identity, supported by the character of our interactions, is subject to powerful controls. If recognition is withdrawn, identity flounders and frequently collapses.

We seem to be in bondage to society, assured, however, as much by collusion as conquest. We do not seem to mind playing the parts that society has assigned to us or by its rules. In fact, most of the time, we desire just what society wants of us and do not give any deliberate thought to it. Since the solidity of identity turns on assent to societal demands, we assure ourselves that we cannot act another way. This is "bad faith"--the pretension that something is obligatory and necessary when, in fact, it is voluntary (Berger, 1963:143-144).

Berger's (1963) approach to the relationship between individual and society might generally be defined as "phenomenological" or "interaction-ist." That is to say, he sees that the unique meanings and constructions of any situation depend, in part, on the agreements, dialogues, conver-sations, confrontations, and give-and-take of the interactants. In this way all situations are, in some ways, idiosyncratic and their reality is built of the symbolic currency exchanged by the participants. Obviously, the demands of convention, rules, socialization and institutionalization, all assure some regularity and regulation of individual desire and social requisite. But the possibility of dramatic reconstruction or altering of the social context is always imminent. Each encounter can, with para-meters, be approached as undefined and waiting to emerge. It is the individual selves that will give it flavor (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969).

The more structural view of the "fact" of society is given its most extreme expression, in this country, by Goffman's (1974) notion of "frame" and suggests that everyday events (not chance, random or fortuitous encounters) are governed by an invisible symbolic perimeter within which a structure of rules, language, meaning, spirit and tempo lie and which must be played out (or most assuredly will be played out) regardless of the intents, capacities, and ingenuities of the players. Thus, the interactionist ethos is reversed. In Goffman's (1974) frame, the self is a post-hoc construction reflective of the structure of the interactional world which it represents. "I assume," says Goffman (1974:6-11), "that definitions of a situation are built in accordance with principles of organization which govern events--at least social ones--and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify."

Later, Goffman (1974:13) elaborates, "I am not addressing the structure of social life, but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives." And, then, most crucially, "I personally hold society to be first in every way and any individual's current involvements to be second..."

It is, therefore, inconceivable to Goffman (1974) that we could manage to move from occasion to occasion, experience to experience, were it not for a pre-existing structure inherent in them--whether we are talking about making love, getting welfare, or eating out. The irony of this view is, of course, that most of us think to one degree or another that we create the drama of the moment, that it is putty in our hands when, if Goffman (1974) is right, the beginning, middle, end, ethos, and the dramaturgical sense of an experience exist independently of us and our efforts. Our success in negotiating experiences is often based only on a fortuitous correspondence between our reading of the experience and what the frame manifests. However, sometimes the reading is faulty and the experience turns out to be clumsy, embarrassing, or oppressive.

The elements of a frame are systemic--they always cohere and are found together and, as a system, they answer "all questions about what it is that shall be taken by the participants as real and how it is that they should be involved in this reality" (Gonos, 1977:860). With Goffman (1974) then, one can say that the initiatory act by social actors is to breathe life into this prefabricated, solid frame.

Luckily, for the sake of something interesting turning up, frames can be altered, transformed, or broken--deliberately or inadvertently. It is here, in this aspect of the frame that the possibilities for subverting oppressive or unrewarding "primary" (culturally salient and widespread)

frameworks increase (Goffman, 1974). We will return to these possibilities
when discussing intervention.

Psychological Elements in Interactional Oppression

Interactional exchanges have been the focus of thousands of experi-
ments. These have become a valuable source of knowledge about the
dimensions of situational power. Beyond that, the experiment itself is,
in our view, a symbolically sparse but particularly apt model or para-
digm of oppressive encounters. There are some specific elements of
certain experiments (and elements of interaction "proved" by experiments)
which add to our understanding of the psychology of interactional oppression.

1. _Informational deprivation_. In any situation, particularly those
which are new to us, we want to know, "What's going on here?" The value
of primary frameworks in everyday life is that they provide, as experience
unfolds, a ready answer. In an experiment, the experimenter, for the sake
of the internal validity of the experiment, gives only minimal, often
deliberately misleading, information about what is going on. Since a
coherent cognitive structure usually depends on a coherent environmental
structure, in many experiments the structure is provided through stark
information, often "fake." For example, in the well known Milgram (1963)
experiments subjects are told they are involved in an experiment on the
effects of punishment on learning. They are told little more than that,
and the number of environmental cues is minimal. In fact, they are
involved in a rather complicated "ruse" in which they are the subjects
of a study of obedience to authority (the experimenter).

In dealing with bureaucratic authority (as welfare client, mental
patient, prospective adoptive parent, addict counseling, etc.) clients
are often not furnished sufficient information and, thus, are reliant,
often excessively so, on the authority (or representative) to provide
leading interactional cues. The doctor may not tell the patient fully
why he/she is being subjected to certain procedures; the social worker
may not inform the client of the fullest extent of rights to which she/he
is entitled; the therapist may not divulge the extent to which what seems
to be spontaneous interaction is governed by technique. Furthermore,
and very important, the bureaucratic agent reveals little of anything
about him or herself. Whomever controls the information, controls the
situation.

2. _Ambiguity_. An old social science saw is that humans, in order
to avoid the "buzzing, blooming confusion" of their "world" need cogni-
tive consistency, a sense of continuity, coherence, and structure (even
though an artifice) about the realities with which they deal (Heider,
1958; Festinger, 1957). In many experiments, the situation is ambiguous,

uncertain, new; the subject voraciously seeks clues about what is expected, what will happen, what the process will be like. This leaves the subject highly susceptible to clues and cues about what is to follow.

Actually, in many experiments, the source of ambiguity is doublefold. In the first place, the first entree into the experimental situation for the subject is fraught with uncertainty and cues of conflicting or obscure meaning. In the second place, as the bogus definition of the situation (to hide the real intent of the experiment) unfolds, further ambiguity is experienced (often deliberately arranged by the experimenter in order to render subjects more amenable to experimental variables) as the subject attempts to figure out the nature of the experiment.

People seeking help, especially if entitlement is uncertain and they are novice help-seekers, are uncertain about the salient dimensions of the helping situation, and desperately need guiding and defining clues. Frank et.al. (1978) are convinced that the single most important reason for drop-out in psychotherapy is that expectations are not quickly firmed up and realistic. Too often the clues available suggest "agentic" (non-autonomous) behavior and leave the client on the deficit end of inter-personal power. If ambiguity is strong enough people tend to derive expectations in terms of what they are told, what they see others doing, or on the basis of their own idiosyncratic interpretation of available contextual clues. In many cases, the situation of a new client seeking help is exactly the same as a volunteer subject in a psychological experiment. Once a definition is concertized--to lessen ambiguity--it becomes difficult to change.

3. _Emotional arousal_. A central part of many experiments (and other more salacious attempts at persuasion) is the manipulation of emotional arousal. A physiologically palpable state, arousal begets vigilance, attentional narrowing and, when paired with ambiguity, appears to increase subjects' readiness to accept an externally induced situational definition. Several kinds of experiments employ arousal as a key element. One kind, the Asch (1956) paradigm, counterposes the discomfort associated with being in disagreement with the majority and the demand by authorities to make an "accurate" judgment. In the paradigm, the judgments made by the majority are patently wrong and the tension between the recognition of the error (by the minority of one) and the weight of majority opinion and the expectation of the experimenter (authority) dramatically increases the subjects' inability to make an autonomous judgment. Krech et.al. (1962) have found that subjects would accept the majority's judgments even if they were absurd or repugnant to one's personal and political opinions. Bogdanoff et.al. (1961) even found that in such arousal producing dilemmas eventual conformity is associated with a pronounced

reduction in the production of lipids (which usually accompanies CNS arousal).

A client seeking help, particularly from a social vantage point of "underdog," would seem to be vulnerable to arousal. The decision to seek help in the first place, the uncertainty of the demands of the helping situation, the putative designation as someone who has not coped or succeeded may all conspire to elevate CNS activity. To douse arousal, blind acceptance of the expectations which seem to inhere in the context would seem appropriate. To question the situation, to pursue one's rights to challenge the sense of the situation would only seem to exacerbate arousal. The firmer, the narrower, maybe even the more dependency-inspiring the defintion, the safer it seems.

4. Authority. An assumption borne out of Milgram's (1963) many experiments and supported by social critics and theorists is that we are predisposed in a bureaucratic environment particularly to obey those who have authority. The immediacy and saliency of the authority figure are important. That is, if the authority is not present, active, or in-context, the tendency to obey is dramatically curtailed.

In help-seeking situations the behavioral requisites are usually put forth--though often implicitly--by staff. The discomforts of arousal and ambiguity lend credibility and vigor to expectations that emanate from authority figures. Many helpers may capitalize on imputed authority (being called doctor when the individual is not, but allowing the impression to remain) because they know that authority increases power which increases, in certain cases, the probability of influence attempts.

5. Symbolic relevance. Many experiments turn on elaborate and poignant deceptions. This is standard fare. Part of the success of these dramaturgical deceits is the cunning employment of the cultural symbols which convey and support the concept of authority and, thus, shift the balance of power away from the subject. The fact that the experimenter is a scientist, wears a white coat, speaks in "scientese," utilizes complex and elaborate machinery, cavorts in the hallowed halls of academe, and assumes the demeanor of authoritative expertness all make it problematic for the subject to resist the projected definition of the experimental situation. Goffman (1959) again, has given remarkable, literate, and compelling descriptions of the filigree of strategies by which officialdom manipulates decor and demeanor to insure maintenance of power when, if examined rationally, the basis for their power would crumble instantly.

In a word, in settings where many clients receive help the weight

of supporting symbols are all on the side of the staff. There are no
symbols which support client autonomy and prerogative.

Implications for Practice

To return to our central points: It is our belief that the problems
that confront minorities are often exaggerated by situational inequities,
and that these inequities are preserved by a combination of social
structural and psychological elements which can be known and manipulated
ultimately to the client's advantage. A practitioner concerned about
the fate of clients, especially less powerful ones, within the bureau-
cratic labyrinth of help-seeking/giving may be able to employ this know-
ledge to help clients restore a more equitable balance in their relation-
ships with helping institutions and individuals. It seems to us that
techniques are needed which:

1. teach the less powerful to detect and assess those elements of
situations which sustain or presume an unequal power balance and thus
are oppressive;

2. teach the less powerful ways and means of neutralizing, lessen-
ing, or subverting these inequities that do not interrupt the process
of getting help, care, resources to which the individual is entitled.

Breaking Frame

It is Goffman's (1974) notion that frames (described earlier) are
always vulnerable and can be broken—by unexpected events, accidentally
or deliberately, from above or below (that is, by superiors or subordinates).
Broken frames lead to "negative" experience which may involve a distur-
bance in the control of, or ease of acting within a frame, the cogni-
tive and affective reserve (which varies by degrees—consider the
difference between the intake worker in a public welfare department and
a counselor working with dying patients) is destroyed as a person becomes
confronted directly with the face-to-face possibilities or risks in the
situation. That is, one can no longer automatically or easily accept
the framed experience. (With the proviso that every frame has a certain
tolerance for breakage—meaning that a certain degree of frame disruptions
may occur with the capacity to disattend to them inherent within the
frame.) Given this, in Goffman's (1974:423) words "...it is apparent
that those presumably not in charge of the activity can intentionally
attempt to create negative experiences for this in presumed control."
This may involve something more, say, than "heckling" which is the
"minimum standard" frame break. It is "discomfiting and discrediting
of an adversary by violating the rules (often subtle, implicit, nonverbal—

the authors) of the frame for interaction he is helping to sustain"
(Goffman, 1974:426). This kind of social sabotage is often ingenious,
inspired by a sense of fun as well as fury, but very little is known
about it in a methodical sense. It is here that we propose a development
of interest in and concern for breaking frame as (a) a piece of valuable
knowledge for clients to be aware of, and (b) the basis for interrupting
power in inequitable transactions, and restoring them to more equitable
footing. One of the current classic examples of frame-breaking from
below is, of course, Wolfe's (1970) description of Mau-Mauing the Flak
Catchers which elevated, among other things, confrontation--"a frontal
attack on the ground rules of a situation" (Goffman, 1974:428)--to an
art form.

After the frame has become unsettled, the interactionists' view of
exchange may be more relevant to the encounter between client and worker.
That is, at this point, the evolution and articulation of the situation
is--to a greater extent than before--in the hands of the actors. Given
the psychological preparation described below, clients can learn to
seize the initiative and project a definition of the situation, thus
influencing the repair of the debilitated frame.

Implication: after having been exposed to learning about frames
and the power of situations, clients may learn a variety of techniques
which may have the effect of breaking the frame--from confrontation
(which for many clients, is least probable) to upsetting temporal and
spatial frames (e.g., arriving late and pulling one's chair around to
the side of a desk to be "closer" to, say, the interviewer). These
tactics would be role-played and rehearsed before being employed in a
real situational frame. Again, the point of such learning is to deflate
the ethos of oppression and authoritarianism that exists within the
frame of being helped--in some contexts.

Micropolitical Subversions

Once in a frame it becomes, of course, relevant to the adequacy
of the client's pursuits to employ oneself to forestall (or neutralize)
the psychological effects of the inequality. That is, knowledge of
frame-breaking itself is insufficient--methodologically and motivationally--
to completely loosen the grip of authoritarian frames. Clients must be
aware, too, of the interpersonal sources, the subtle cues, that surround
the initiatory steps in becoming powerless in interaction (micropolitics).
Thus, learning about the effects of arousal, ambiguity, authority, obed-
ience, and symbolic relevance create, hopefully, the readiness to per-
ceive them and prepare to dilute their impact. Thus, in Henley's (1974)
view, women remain oppressed, in fact and feeling, in a variety of

situations because they are unaware of the micropolitics which under-
mine confidence in their views and rights and render them helpless.
The implication being, here, that for any political revolution to be
successful on behalf of women's interests and concerns, there also
may have to be a micropolitical revolution so that women can stave off
and subvert the implications of manner and demeanor in interaction with
men and each other.

This is a precious piece of wisdom, we feel, and fits in with the
second part of our framework for developing practice. Once we teach
clients the range of cues and clues that lead them to feel powerless
and act powerless, we can, with them, develop techniques for overriding
those elements in the interest of getting their needs met and rights
established.

Implication: assuming clients now recognize external cues that
indicate inequality and internal cues that suggest "surrender," they
may be taught a number of techniques for subverting the psychological
oppression of situations and frames. For example, learning to ask
questions about the client role, the services offered, the expectations
of the helper, can help reduce informational deprivation. Asking per-
sonal questions of the helper or authority may help undermine the
presumption of mystery that inflates power. Decreasing physical distance,
correcting infantilizing terms of address, insisting on eye contact can
help disassemble the trappings of authority. Preparatory techniques
(imaging authorities in all too human situations—going to the toilet,
eating, etc., recognizing one's own symptoms of arousal and learning
coping self-talk to calm oneself, for example) can help in easing the
habitual emotional response to confrontation with power and authority.

As we suggested above, once the frame is disturbed and the psycho-
logical concomitants of situational oppression are managed, then the
opportunity exists for a symbolic reconstruction of the exchange more to
the advantage of the client. How this is to be done is not clear but it
may involve some training in dialogue, rhetorical principles (influential,
persuasive speech), and in crude dialectics. Though these sound out-
rageously complex, in fact they may boil down to some elementary, eminently
utilitarian principles and techniques. Jacobo Varela (1970) and Paulo
Freire (1970) have been able to use similar approaches in helping those
at a situational disadvantage assume responsibility.

Conclusions

To get the help one deserves and needs is often thwarted by the
structural and psychological elements which create and sustain inter-
actional inequalities. This is especially true for groups of clients

who are oppressed in the normal but unfortunate course of their every-
day lives. Given some theoretical and empirical support, techniques
can be developed to teach clients to be aware of and diminish the aspects
of situations which make them feel powerless and, ultimately, get less
help than they need or are entitled to. Assertive training, for example,
is not enough for these individuals because it lacks political substance
and is sociologically naive. Methods of more moment and promise must
be based on a fuller, more sophisticated exposition of the contextual,
micropolitical supports to oppression.

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