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The Problem of Power

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to examine various critical theoretical traditions for what power is and how it works.*

A colleague of ours has remarked that once two people are together in a room they have to then deal with relationships of power. Within the pervasive humanist traditions in North American adult education, adult educators do have a strong “people focus” to their practice and theory. But because most theorists and many practitioners tend to ignore or deplore the workings of power in practice and theory, power continues to be problematic. Those adult education theorists who do tend to the problem of power too often do so either presumptively (assuming we all know what power is – when we truly do not) or in under-theorized ways. For example, a close examination of Cervero and Wilson’s (2001) *Power in Practice*, which purported to have theorists examining their own educational practices for elucidating their theories of power, illustrates that theorists can identify the workings of power in their practice but struggle with theorizing concretely about those workings. This veiled recognition has a long tradition in academic adult education (Cervero & Wilson, in press). Clearly Clark’s famous 1956 depiction of adult education’s institutional marginality was an analysis of the workings of power, yet it took Donaldson and Edelson (2000) to name it so theoretically. Practitioners on the other hand often have sophisticated practical understandings of how power works, enough so that they are able to work effectively. But too often they are unable to articulate their practical knowledge, and worse, their insights are routinely ignored by academic analysts. Further, even though the academic field of adult education generally does not trouble itself with the problem of power, if we hear one more time academic or practitioner alike saying they have power “figured out” and then unknowingly recite Mary Parker Follett’s 80 year old dictum of “empowering” people by shifting from “power over” to “power with,” we think we will scream: “No word is used more carelessly by us than the word ‘power.’ I know of no conception which needs to-day more careful analysis. We have not even decided whether power is a ‘good’ word or a ‘bad’ word” (Follett, 1926, p. 9 in Metcalf & Urwick, n.d.). Indeed, her caution is still valid today. The prevalent view in adult education, when we think of it at all, would suggest we have made up our minds that power is bad while we continue to ignore prominent social and political theory that identifies the myriad ways of power in our educational work.

Increasingly throughout the twentieth century power has become an ever more important question in much social inquiry: “Although the precise effects of power [or even what it is, we would add] remain a subject of debate . . . the failure of previous accounts of power to fully comprehend the role of power in the shaping of human life” continues (Wartenburg, 1992, p. xi). Yet even within a hastening and sometimes vitriolic conversation – witness the contributions of Arendt, Benhabib, Bordieu, Dahl, Foucault, Fraser, Giddens, Habermas, Harvey, Kristeva, LeFebvre, Lukes, Said, Talburt, and others – theorists in academic adult education have continued languishing their time away by dreaming longingly of andragogical and Rogerian heavens here on earth. We share the view that power remains a constituting phenomenon that is “always there” regardless of whether we take note of it practically or theoretically. Thus, we believe there is a need to identify and understand the presence of power, how it works in the work of adult education, and what its consequences are both for the practical work we do as

educators as well as how we theorize that practical work. If, as we believe, power is “one of the fundamental realities of human social existence, a reality that explains the oppressive and demeaning nature of the conditions of human life” as well as opportunities for change, then “power remains an important concept for explaining those conditions and thinking of possible means” (Wartenburg, 1992, p. ix) of using power to alter such conditions. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine critical social theory for what power is and how it works. Although we remain critical of previous accounts to understand power in shaping human life, we are under no illusion of expecting to provide a comprehensive account of the many meanings and manifestations of power. We do intend to present a bit of a metanarrative (we hear the postmodernists moaning now) of several broad traditions of understanding power. We do so in three parts. First, we provide a brief critique of Cervero and Wilson’s (2001) depiction of theories of power in adult education. Next, we provide an overview and expansion of our own recent analysis of theories of power (Nesbit & Wilson, in press) to include realist notions of power. We conclude with a tentative contraction of that account to sketch four broad traditions of theorizing power: behaviorist, communicative, decentered, and realist. Although we can only introduce that effort here, we would expect to provoke debate but will settle for awareness.

Adult Education Has No Face

Often unable to keep the presence of power unfelt, historically the theoretical literature of American adult education has forthrightly and formally ignored power, preferring because of its persistent insistence on what we might term naïve structural-functionalism to rest its laurels on an overly technical interpretation of technical rationality (Cervero & Wilson, in press). In contrast to the dominance of theoretical ignorance, there are contemporary examinations of power in North American adult education although such analyses do seem quite provincial at times. Within a sporadic and often oblique discussion, Cervero and Wilson (2001) have identified and critiqued three traditions of understanding power in adult education: the political as personal, the political as practical, and the political as structural. By far the dominant approach to power in practice and theory in adult education is the first tradition. In this view adult educators seek to neutrally facilitate andragogical, developmental, and transformational learning. Individual change and development are thought to ultimately benefit society as a vague manifestation of humanist values and Enlightenment progress. Because of the resolute focus on individual change, the political is thought of in terms of the personal and not believed to have any effect on educational practice. At best naïve, such an accommodationist view is actually socially and politically reproductive of dominant power relations. In the second tradition, the political as practical, adult educators understand power as the ability to “get things done” in organizational settings. This understanding of power focuses on the political “how to” of achieving goals in power-saturated organizations. Questions of what power is, how power works, and for whom in terms of adult education’s participation in and reproduction of typically inequitable systems of power are largely ignored. Whereas the first tradition has a social vision of individual development, the second tradition largely lacks any social vision except the pragmatic pursuit of individual interests in surviving/manipulating organizational relations of power. The political as structural tradition, a small but vibrant practical and theoretical tradition in adult education, calls explicitly for a redistribution of power through the practice of adult education. Specific democratic values of dialog, deliberation, and social justice are championed through practical action which seeks to recognize, challenge, and change socially-structured relations of power constructed through and within economic, gender, racial, sexual, and cultural

practices that benefit the few while disadvantaging many.

These traditions in North American adult education do evidence in various ways how power is embedded and operates in a wide variety of settings and practices. With the partial exception of the structural tradition, they are, however, typically unconcerned with, indeed, unaware of the productive and recursive nature and effects of power. As many of the authors in Cervero and Wilson (2001) illustrate, even those who make a conscious effort to engage with questions of power tend to do so in terms of consequences of power rather than in efforts to understand power itself: “they rarely undertake an explanatory analysis of the mechanisms by which educational processes and situations are linked to social structures or how power and authority are used to create systems of control within and between educational institutions” (Nesbit & Wilson, 2003, p. 309). Thus, in discussions in adult education, power rarely, if ever, has a “face” (a reference to the “three faces of power” debate in political theory described below). We have begun the paper with these traditions to argue that they have been able to provide only sparse critical insight into the political practice of adult education. The broader social and political theory we now turn to provides far more robust understandings of the workings and effects of power.

Three Faces and Beyond

Naïve or what we might term folk or vulgar views of power almost always identify power as coercive force. Certainly a profound everyday occurrence, such a view is far too limiting to be useful (it is this view that adult educators often presume when they assume a common understanding of power). Because of this limited definition and the limited discussion in academic adult education, we have been investigating theories of power in critical social theory to understand origins, presence, and possibilities (Nesbit & Wilson, 2003, in press; Wilson & Cervero, 2002; Wilson & Nesbit, 2003, in press). We initially began these investigations by examining specific critical social theorists such as Arendt, Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Harvey, and others who both evolve from but rapidly distance themselves from classic nineteenth century social theory of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others. Part of that transition is motivated by what Wartenberg describes as “the newly discovered complexity of the presence and workings of power in society” (1992, p. xxvi). That discovery of course has a history. Clegg (1989), Forester (1989), Isaac (1987), and Winter (1996) have shown how Dahl’s 1950s critique of Mills’ studies of elitist or sovereign forms of power introduced the first of the behaviorist three faces of power debate (A makes B do A’s will). Bachrach and Baratz introduced the second face (the mobilization of bias) which Lukes (1974) subsequently turned into the full three faces debate (social-structural production of consent). This behaviorist/empiricist/Humean causalist (Isaac, 1987; Winter, 1996) depiction of power soon was supplanted by the “newly discovered complexity” of power analyses by Benhabib, Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Harvey, Lefebvre, and so on in the 1970s/1980s.

Our investigations into these analyses have enabled us (Nesbit & Wilson, in press) to describe four broad interpretive traditions which roughly parallel but encompass and transcend Cervero and Wilson’s three traditions: agentic, structuralist, agentic-structuralist integration, and social process. Most theoretical discussions of power focus on the relative importance of either human agency or structural aspects on influencing behavior. In North America, the agentic tradition is by far the most common (Clegg, 1989; Isaac, 1987) because it views power as “something” a person or group (an “agent”) “has.” In classic political theory parlance, the theoretical depiction of vulgar views, A has the power/capacity through the exercise or potential

to exercise force to make B do what A wants regardless of whether B wants to or not (Isaac, 1987; Winter, 1996). Clegg (1989) argues that we are “stuck” in an agentic view of power because so much of our contemporary understandings of power emanate from Thomas Hobbes’ view of power as sovereignty. The agentic view is challenged by structuralist approaches in which power is understood as supra-individual and irreducible forces (e.g., class, race, gender, etc.) operating unseen and unacknowledged “behind the actor’s back” to influence/determine people and their activities. Although still primarily behaviorist, Lukes’ (1974) “radical view” of power began the move from seeing power in simple empiricist, that is, measurable, terms and seeing power as emanating from structural forces (Clegg, 1989). The production of consent, the third face that Lukes describes, Clegg argues, if left unchallenged, connects easily with Critical Theory’s insights about hegemonic cultural practices. The agentic and structuralist views have produced and maintained a split between views of power as individually exercised and power as inherent in social forces. Thus, these views remain “stuck” in a “simple” behaviorist reality of contingent regularities (Isaac, 1987; Winter, 1996).

To get beyond the empiricist limitations of behaviorist/positivist interpretations, more recent efforts generate social constructionist insights to integrate agency and structure. This integrationist view is best represented by the work of Giddens (1984) whose structuration theory explains how people through their participation in social practices both produce outcomes as well as reproduce their capacities (i.e., power) to act in specific social relations. Giddens resurrects the view that power is “relational,” that is, power relations are dependent and mutually constituting. Integrationist traditions enable descriptions of power as a productive and generative social process rather than a pre-existing agentic or structuralist force, quality, or condition. The chief architect of the social process approach is Foucault (1980), for whom power is neither a “thing” nor a quality, capacity, or possession of particular people. Rather, it only takes shape through the joint agency of all those who participate in a given set of social relations. Foucault’s approach challenges the totalizing characteristic of agentic and structuralist traditions: “it neither falsely subjectivizes power nor falsely elides agency” (Winter, 1996, p. 728). Foucault has revolutionized the analysis of power by locating it as a productive phenomenon constituting the very possibility of human interaction (Clegg, 1989; Wartenberg, 1992; Winter, 1996). Developing Machivellian rather than Hobbesian insights (Clegg, 1989), the operation of power for Foucault is an all-pervasive process from which no one escapes and in which everyone participates: “Foucault argues that power is both ‘relational’ and ‘capillary,’ something that permeates every aspect of the social world. There are no agents who are simply possessors of power and who can use it to dominate others. Rather, power is itself something that permeates all social relationships and that constitutes all human beings” (Wartenberg, 1992, p. xxii).

To our initial array, we now add a realist view of power. Realism is a philosophy of science, beginning to influence social inquiry, that seeks to transcend the traditional notions of Humean causality (contingent regularities in the form of A co-varies with B, whose covariance thus enables the inference that A caused B) by positing what once would have been described as a “metaphysical” notion of causality; it does so by rejecting the empiricist view of causality deployed in the three faces debate (Clegg, 1989; Isaac, 1987). Rather than focusing on observable contingent regularity, realists instead attempt to identify relatively enduring properties that are actually causal mechanisms: “[the] realist approach is that human agency has social-structural preconditions . . . social structures consist of this relatively enduring social relations between agents in the performance of definite social practices” (Isaac, 1987, p. 57).

Within a realist analysis, “power is an enduring capacity to act, which may or may not be exercised on any particular occasion” (Isaac, 1987, p. 72). In this view power is implicated in social structure and is a required but contingently operating feature of human agency.

We are following the lead of others who have attempted to identify the intersections and linkages among what appear to be a vast but unconnectable array of disparate social analyses of power. Examples include Isaac’s (1987) realist critique of the three faces of power debate, Clegg’s (1989, p. xv) “groupings” of “dispositional, agency, and facilitative concepts of power” as “circuits of power,” Wartenberg’s (1992) “rethinking of power” in terms of “the immersion of humans in nets of power relations” (p. xix), and Hayward’s (2000) “de-facing” of power. Lacking space we can only point to our future directions: what do behaviorist, communicative, decentered, and realist views of power provide us for the theory and practice of adult education?

So What

In this paper we have started integrating what we have been learning from these various traditions about what power is and how it works. We refrain from arguing for a particular point of view because we lack the hubris to believe a total or single theory of power is possible or desirable. Indeed, a key argument we make in this paper is that there are many theories of power, and hence many problems, because power is recursively imbricated in all human interactions. So, one might ask, who cares, why should we endeavor to understand power and its play in our educational work? We suggest two reasons here. First is a practical response. The world is routinely, systematically unjust and power is a major facilitator of inequitable production and distribution of resources, benefits, accesses, etc. Within a general “critical” project, we see the need to develop more adequate theories of power in order to improve the lives of human beings because much traditional theory (e.g., the three faces) has failed “to fully comprehend the role of power in shaping human life” (Wartenberg, 1992, p. xi). We agree with Wartenberg that too many power theorists have been unable to appreciate the complexities and nuances of power: “power manifests itself as a complex social presence that exists in an intricate network of overlapping and contradictory relations. The task . . . is to provide a conception of power that does justice to its tangled empirical reality while at the same time providing the social theorists with a precise tool for criticizing social practices and institutions. In particular, theories of power must explain the immersion of human beings in nets of power relations that constrain their possibilities while simultaneously uncovering the means by which human beings have the ability to resist and challenge those relations” (1992, p. xix). Thus we wish to promote Wartenberg’s argument for critical social inquiry that develops explanatory language that accounts for the “newly discovered complexity” of power and how it works. Second, following on Wartenberg’s suggestion, we need more than awareness; we need means. Because of the epistemological proclivities of academic adult education (among other conditions too numerous to detail), there is a fundamental problem with the discipline’s theoretical work: the theory-practice gap. That gap has persisted for so long, we now take it for granted. Among many reasons, the theory-gap persists because generally the discipline of adult education lacks a theory of practical action. Isaac provides one example of why a theory of practical action is necessary: “Theories of power . . . should be conceived as interpretative models, developed by social scientists as submitted to the rigors of critical consideration, about social structures which shape human action and distribute the capacities to act among social agents” (1987, p. 75). Neither adult education theory or much of its practice has generally been able to meet such a standard. If we cannot “see” the conditions in which we enact our social practices (like education), then we

can have little hope of challenging or changing inequitable ones. This is the larger problem to which this paper is directed although we are only able to set the stage here for such an encounter. If we as a discipline are ever to have important things to say about the work of adult educators, then we have to work towards transcending this gap. So we use the paper to begin developing a more general theory of power (or rather theories) via working toward a theory of practical action that sees power as a central constituent of human educational interaction. Because power is constructed in and through social interactions, it is always alterable and disruptable, hence the importance of understanding and using power in adult education.

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