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## *Presidential Address*

### BRIEF THOUGHTS ON POWER ANALYSIS IN EDUCATION

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The theme for 2020's Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education conference was "power." We didn't try to define this, both because we wanted to allow people to define it themselves for their own purposes, and because there is a lot of disagreement about what "power" means. We are recycling this theme for 2021, since we were not able to meet in 2020 due to Covid.

In this brief essay, I explore one branch of the theory of power. I describe a set of conceptual tools that can help groups analyze the kinds of power that are operating in the oppressive contexts they may be facing, showing how conducting such analysis can help people (teachers, students, community people, and others) understand the challenges they face in making change and inform efforts to construct strategies for action.

There are a whole range of articles and books talking about power, how to get power, theorizing about power from the perspective of multiple fields and contexts and experiences, and the like. As Stephen Lukes noted, there is no simple answer to what "power" *is*, because "power is essentially a contested concept."<sup>1</sup> What we call "power" will depend on the kinds of questions we are asking.

The central text that many people in academia start with is Lukes's brief but famous *Power: A Radical View*, first published in 1974 and reissued with two new chapters in 2005. In *Power*, Lukes was interested in how some people can control and influence others, and this specific interest helps him frame what he focuses on. He argued that there are three main forms of power:

- The One-Dimensional View focuses on overt visible efforts by people to control other people and their actions.
- The Two-Dimensional View focuses on less direct forms of exerting power over people by controlling the agenda or determining ahead of time which options are available to choose from.
- The Three-Dimensional View (added in the 2005 edition) looks at how power can alter how people perceive their self-interests and experience desires, and thus can change behavior without any overt coercion, still focusing, however, on how specific people can dominate others.

A challenge with Lukes's vision, and that of others writing about power, however, is that while it can serve as a useful analytical tool, it is difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View, Second Edition* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 30.

know how to actually apply it in practice. This is of interest to me because my research focuses on how to build power through collective action, and a more practice-oriented framework would be helpful in thinking about what kinds of power different approaches to collective action do and do not tend to produce or emphasize.

Interestingly, one of Lukes's doctoral students was John Gaventa, who wrote his dissertation on how power played out in the context of Appalachian miners.<sup>2</sup> Instead of becoming a professor, Gaventa went to work at the Highlander School with Myles Horton and others.<sup>3</sup> Located in the South, Highlander focuses on a particular kind of radical popular education with adults, helping groups from communities that are oppressed in different ways find ways to act for change. Highlander worked with the early labor union movement, the civil rights movement (the Freedom Schools came out of Highlander), and communities fighting environmental degradation in Appalachia, among many others. Gaventa's long work in a practice context, working on the challenges involved when the relatively powerless collectively challenge the powerful, meant that when he did shift to a more "academic" position in England at the University of Surrey in the Institute for Development Studies, he came with the depth of experience necessary to build a new conceptual framework for power. In my other work,<sup>4</sup> I have found that it is from what one might term activist/scholars like Gaventa that we can learn the most about practical theoretical tools for action.

Gaventa calls his framework the "PowerCube" because he imagines it as a kind of Rubik's Cube,<sup>5</sup> with different aspects of power on each of three sides and the capacity to move the different components of the continuums around depending on what one is working on. One of the best sources to understand his vision is the website, [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net), which he developed with his students, drawing from a wide range of scholars including Lukes, Jo Rolands, feminist visions of power as described by Amy Allen, Foucault, Bourdieu, and others.<sup>6</sup> Gaventa and his students argued that:

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<sup>2</sup> John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller, *People Power: The Alinsky Organizing Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> John Gaventa and Associates, "Powercube," [www.powercube.net](http://www.powercube.net).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed., John Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Jo Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam, 1997); Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

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- “The forms dimension refers to the ways in which power manifests itself, including its visible, hidden and invisible forms.”<sup>7</sup>
  - Visible power is overtly consciously perceptible to those who are affected.
  - Hidden power is power that is exerted in spaces hidden from others (the smoke-filled rooms where decision-makers meet).
  - Invisible power is power that affects people without them knowing it; the kind of power that affects how we think and what we desire.
- “The spaces dimension of the powercube refers to the potential arenas for participation and action, including what we call closed, invited and claimed spaces.”<sup>8</sup>
  - Closed spaces are ones that are not open to those who are not part of the powerful decision-making group in any context (again, the smoke-filled rooms).
  - Invited spaces are ones where powerful people invite you to talk with them (think, for example, of politician “listening sessions” where they may not actually be “listening” to anything they don’t already agree with).
  - Claimed spaces are spaces that are wrested away from the traditionally powerful.
- “The levels dimension of the powercube refers to the differing layers of decision-making and authority held on a vertical scale, including the local, national and global.”<sup>9</sup>
  - Local power is just that, the capacity to affect what happens in your local community or context. This is limited because the important decisions that affect you often actually take place at higher levels.
  - National Power
  - Global Power

The website also discusses a fourth set of concepts: “power over” (the capacity to control others), “power to” (an individual’s capacity to act), “power with” (the capacity to collaborate with others), and “power within” (one’s internal resources for engagement and action).

Gaventa and associates argue that this powercube model

grew originally as a way of exploring how powerful actors control the agenda through and the ability of less powerful actors to build their awareness and action for change. But it can be also be used to think about the openings, levels and strategies to exercise agency, e.g. to strengthen the power to

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<sup>7</sup> Gaventa, “Powercube.”

<sup>8</sup> Gaventa, “Powercube.”

<sup>9</sup> Gaventa, “Powercube.”

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act. By looking at how alliances are formed with actors working on each dimension and aspect of the powercube, we can explore the potential of building ‘power with’ others. And by using concepts such as ‘invisible power’ and ‘created spaces’, we can explore issues of ‘power within’.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the powercube approach was developed to inform efforts to create power, providing conceptual tools for understanding the kinds of power one is developing and perhaps the kinds of power one needs to be focusing on developing in order to be successful as a community works to use power to foster social change. And the website provides a range of examples where this model has been used in pragmatic international development spaces ranging from Liberia to Kenya to the UK.<sup>11</sup>

For example, one case study examines the creation of a power-sharing agreement between the officially elected president and the opposition candidate after a contested election for president. The study notes that the agreement was reached in an “invited” space where very few people were allowed access, meaning that for most in Zimbabwe it was a “closed” space.<sup>12</sup> The solution was reached at the regional level in Africa and not within the structure of the nation-state. In terms of the concepts of hidden and invisible power,

Both the nature of the space and the choice of a regional forum become more significant when the power dynamics that were at play in this process are unpacked. On the surface, this was a mediation space in which arguments from either side would be mediated and resolved on a rational basis – through a visible decision-making process (albeit only visible to those within the closed space). Beneath the surface, however, the realities of the relationships between the players in the room probably played a much larger role. Hidden power – the mobilization of bias – was evident in the key role played by [South African President] Mbeki, by no means a neutral player with respect to Zimbabwe but one with multiple and deep-rooted obligations to [incumbent President] Mugabe and [opposition candidate] Zanu PF. As the agenda-setter for this mediation process he created a space in which Mugabe and Tsvangirai were treated on far from equal terms.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gaventa, “Powercube.”

<sup>11</sup> Gaventa, “Examples of Analyzing Power,” <https://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/examples-of-analysing-power/?submit=Go>.

<sup>12</sup> Debra Dalton and Estela Vidal Malvar, “Zimbabwe’s Power Sharing Deal,” 2, [http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/case\\_study\\_zimbabwe.pdf](http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/case_study_zimbabwe.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Dalton and Malvar, “Zimbabwe’s Power Sharing Deal,” 3.

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The case study shows how the concepts can help participants and observers make sense of the kinds of power that are playing out in a particular context, raising questions about what a better distribution of power might look like and then, practically, how this might be carried out.

In chapter 2 of my recent book, *Empowerment: A Primer*, I adapted Gaventa's model as a set of tools for evaluating the "kinds" of power gained by different forms of individual and collective empowerment so that readers could see what tends to be accomplished in terms of power for change by different approaches to empowerment.<sup>14</sup>

These ideas about power have been picked up and used to inform the creation of a manual and used in a range of development trainings with local community members and others.<sup>15</sup> And this is where these ideas about power intersect with different kinds of education. Gaventa's concepts become tools for educating people about how power works, where it lies, and helps them think about the kinds of power that they would like to seek to achieve their goals.

For example,

The staff of the program SHAKSHAM at Care India, used power analysis to demonstrate how and why HIV prevention policies with sex workers fail because they assume that what the sex workers lack in order to be able to protect themselves is a pro-active attitude and knowledge about condoms. The analysis demonstrates how the history of the sex industry and the perceptions it has created about sex workers, together with the power dynamics inside the brothels, put sex workers in a position of minimum or no control when it comes to making decisions on HIV prevention. As the NGO observes, what the sex workers lack is not knowledge or political consciousness about their position but the power to use that knowledge. Through power analysis, the organization decided that the creation of claimed spaces, where sex workers can organize for their rights and build social and political influence, should be their indicator of change and that at the same time the organization should assume its role as a powerful actor and

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<sup>14</sup> Aaron Schutz, *Empowerment: A Primer* (Routledge, 2019). The chapter on continuums of power can be found here: [http://www.educationaction.org/uploads/1/0/4/5/104537/empower\\_schutz\\_ch\\_2\\_continuums\\_of\\_power\\_2019.pdf](http://www.educationaction.org/uploads/1/0/4/5/104537/empower_schutz_ch_2_continuums_of_power_2019.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002), <https://justassociates.org/en/resources/new-weave-power-people-politics-action-guide-advocacy-and-citizen-participation>; Maro Pantazidou, "What Next for Power Analysis? A Review of Recent Experience with the Powercube and Related Frameworks," *IDS Working Papers* 2012, no. 400 (2012): 1–46; Marjoke Oosterom and Patta Scott-Villiers, "Introduction: Poverty, Power and Inequality," *IDS Bulletin* 47, no. 5 (2016).

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influence other stakeholders (e.g. public and health services) to support the women’s struggles.<sup>16</sup>

In this case, the powercube analysis pointed to a particular kind of strategy that would provide the base that sex workers needed to build the capacity to be able to speak with collective power about, for example, the kinds of HIV prevention policies that will actually help them.

Another example, of the kinds of strategy the powercube “as an analytical tool,” can point people to, is how it

has been very helpful for flagging up entry points for action... Different entry points have been suggested as responses to different forms of power: public advocacy and litigation for example have been associated with addressing visible power, researching marginalized issues with marginalized people and naming and shaming has been in many cases a response to hidden power and popular education and conscientisation have been utilized to address internalized forms of invisible power.<sup>17</sup>

The powercube set of concepts, then, provides educators with concrete analytical tools that they can help students of all kinds to use to analyze the power situation(s) they are in with respect to any particular issue and provides a base from which they could then move to develop the most relevant strategies for action. It allows people to understand the kinds of power and power structures that are arrayed against them, and to creatively imagine the kinds of power that they would need to have in order to respond effectively.

Understanding the practical strategies that can help groups act to move from this analysis and actually gain the kinds of concrete power that they need is a different discussion. I will be touching on one way to approach practically building collective power at the upcoming 2021 OVPES meeting at the end of September.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Pantazidou, *What Next for Power Analysis*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Pantazidou, *What Next for Power Analysis*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapters 8 and 9 of Schutz, *Empowerment*, for some initial thoughts about some pragmatic approaches to collective action. Chapters 8 on Solidarity (Community Organizing) and 9 Civil Resistance can be accessed here: [http://www.educationaction.org/uploads/1/0/4/5/104537/empower\\_schutz\\_chs\\_7-8\\_2019.pdf](http://www.educationaction.org/uploads/1/0/4/5/104537/empower_schutz_chs_7-8_2019.pdf).

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