Telling the Truth About Power

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About the Author
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Abstract
In this culture, those in power do not usually talk about it and the rest of us tend not to recognize it either. A similar situation exists in therapy, where the therapist herself may not be aware of her own power-over tactics. This paper suggests methods that may help therapists to acknowledge their power and also to change from power-over actions to mutually empowering relationships. From this line of thinking, there follows an exploration of altering the concept of boundaries in therapy into mutually constructed agreements between patient and therapist. This paper was presented at the Summer Training Institute of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, June, 2003.

Hidden Power
They tell women not to begin by apologizing, but after working on this talk, I do think I have to amend the title to “Telling Some Truth about Some Kinds of Power.” You’ll see why.

Many of us in this society (and in some others too) are mixed up about power. Yet power is very real and is operating right in front of us all the time. Quite amazingly, those who have the most power in our society almost never talk about it and even more amazingly induce many of the rest of us not to recognize it either.

As an example, when I was a kid, my friends and I adored going to the movies. We’d go every Saturday afternoon, and for five cents we’d always see two full-length films, a cartoon, a newsreel, and an episode, or what we called a “chapter,” of some long ongoing adventure story, which was almost always a Western. Every week we’d see the “bad guys,” the so-called Indians, portrayed as strange-looking, fierce, uncivilized, savage murderers who were threatening the White cowboys. While I must say that we girls did not join in, the theater rang with ear-shattering cries, cheers, whoops, and whistles when the cowboys hurt or killed the Native Americans.

It never occurred to us that it was the White people who had taken power by force, robbing the Native Americans’ land and destroying their cultures, even calling them by a false name. We absorbed these untruths routinely every week. Thus, you can see how I was drawn into disparaging and even fearing these powerful, violent people (from where I lived in the heart of New York City). I don’t remember history classes in elementary or high school changing these images, and I can’t recall how old I was before I was shocked to learn the truth that we, Whites, had brutally taken power over the Native Americans. Likewise, we never saw any other people of color portrayed with any truth. This is an easy example of how the “cultural materials” of a dominant group...
mystify its operation of power. While everyone may fail to recognize this power-over situation, those closest to the dominant group may be the most likely to do so, e.g., White, middle- or upper-class women.

Is it not similar in therapy? Clearly, the therapist has a huge amount of power over the patient but traditionally has not talked about it. Alfred Adler drew attention to the topic of power early in the history of the psychoanalytic movement, but he was cast out by Freud, and little was heard about it after that. It was really the feminist therapy movement and the movement by therapists of marginalized groups that opened up this whole topic only fairly recently. It makes sense that this was the case.

A group that becomes dominant in any society tends to divide people with less power into groups for various historical reasons. These less powerful groups can include divisions by race, class, gender, sexual preference, and the like. The dominant group often gains tremendous power over the less powerful groups in all realms, including economic, social, political, and cultural. But dominant groups do not usually say, “I have great power over your life; I want to keep it and if possible, increase it because I’m afraid of losing any of it to you.”

Now, here comes a tedious part. Along with the obscurity surrounding power comes confusion in the usage of the word. Without reviewing everyone else’s definitions, let me say that we have used the phrase “power-to” to mean the ability to make a change in any situation, large or small, i.e., the ability to move anything from point A to point B without the connotation of restricting or forcing anyone else. For the later forms of power that imply force, we’ve used the term, “power-over.”

In a basic sense, power-over usually follows from the structural situation whereby one group has more resources and privilege and thus, has more capacity to force or control others. This is the structural power I just referred to above.

Structural power is most influential and most important to recognize. However, in a complicated society there may be variations within, for example today, when an African American woman supervisor may have some power over a White male worker, this usually exists only in the workplace and not when they step outside. Also, even if a dominant group has overwhelming amounts of power over subordinates, subordinates often find some means of exerting power. These can be power-over attempts or power-to actions. For example, in the play, The Servant, British playwright Harold Pinter portrays a clever “man servant” gradually gaining total power over his master. The master is an aristocrat who is reduced to complete dependence because he has been so advantaged that he has not learned how to operate in the world. Such an example, however, does not change the situation of structural power in the world.

At times, subordinates can find the power to resist the force of the dominant group and also add to their power to move toward some structural change, as in the example of Rosa Parks, who began by resisting the insult of bus segregation. That act became a major step in the civil rights movement. What’s more, although history books often lead us to believe that resistance to the dominant group is principally achieved through the separate acts of heroic individuals, this, as in the case of Rosa Parks, is a simplistic understanding. It is important to note that Rosa Parks was not alone in her efforts, but was working with others in her community as a long-time active member of the NAACP.

Rethinking conceptualizations of power, Judith Jordan (1986) and Jan Surrey (1987) have developed the concept of mutual empowerment. This is different from the idea of empowerment and is a complicated concept. I think we can most readily understand it in an example I will use below; so I’ll hold it until then. So much for definitions for now, but it’s even more complex with the many intricacies to be explained at another time.

Clearly, the members of subordinate groups could benefit by joining together within each group and across groups to create change in their conditions. However, in addition to material force, dominant groups usually manufacture false belief systems that act to keep them apart. These belief systems operate in many ways.

**Preventing Change**

For one thing, dominant groups tend to protect the advantages, rewards, and spoils of disconnection by erecting barriers to change. They usually create a whole social structure and culture based on fear—fear of economic suffering, social ostracism, political deprivation, and more. It becomes more complex if we add psychological dimensions. Patricia Hill Collins, an African American sociologist, gives us a basis for understanding these dimensions (1990). In prior work, we have discussed her concept of controlling images (CIs). Dominant groups tend to create sets of images about themselves and each of the “subordinate” groups, e.g., those savage Native Americans, the “Black Mammy,” the “China doll,” and the like. As Collins says, these images are always