

Power-informed practice in social work

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jsw**Samina Karim** 

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Abstract

- *Summary:* This article reviews the existing literature on power within a social work context and extends the analysis to broader sociological understandings through which to rethink the ways in which social work professionals understand and work with power within everyday practice.
- *Findings:* The review argues that prevailing dichotomies, which feature so centrally in theoretical conceptualisations of power, offering binary positions of power as ‘good or bad’, ‘positive or negative’ and ‘productive or limiting’ are limiting in themselves. It is argued that power must also be recognised as a construct which operates in a synchronous way; whereby it can impact in limiting and productive ways at the same time.
- *Applications:* To support this position, the Power-informed Practice (PiP) framework, which recognises power at the individual, professional and structural levels is offered. The utility of the framework in providing a clearer understanding of power is then presented in relation to working with children who have experienced abuse. As a tool, the framework enables social workers to structure their analysis of power within all areas of contemporary social work practice, in order to promote and support processes of empowerment.

Keywords

Social work, power, anti-oppressive practice, empowerment, social work theory, child abuse

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Introduction

Power remains an important phenomenon within modern day social theory (Reed & Weinman, 2019) and a significant focal point of contemporary social work, clearly visible in notions of empowerment and anti-oppressive practice (British Association of Social Work, 2021; Thompson, 2016). Whilst such terms are discursively evident, the concept of power remains contested. As Morriss (2002), points out, we all think we know what we mean by power, but the ability to articulate exactly what it is, seems to fade away upon closer examination. Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus on exactly how power should be understood (Haugaard, 2010; Smith, 2010). As a result, social work practice, which endeavours to be mindful of power, is located amongst competing and conflicting definitions. This highlights the need for social workers to be clearer on what is meant by power, whilst underwriting the imperative for practitioners to be exacting in their understanding about the ways in which power intersects practice (Tew, 2006). Since power exists in all social relationships (Bierstedt, 1950), a key hurdle in reaching a consensual understanding of power is the enormity of the subject in question. Consequently, the context in which power is being considered becomes important (Haugaard, 2010). At the same time, due to the way in which political and theoretical interests shape conceptualisations of power (Lukes, 2005), 'grand' theories of power are increasingly being adapted to provide more nuanced understandings of power within smaller and more specific contexts (Rogers, 2012; Tew, 2006) which, according to Haugaard (2010) is preferable, as all definitions of power contribute to advancing the overall knowledge base on the subject.

Power: A pluralistic perspective

Power is a global and contested concept, with much debate on what power refers to and how it operates (Lukes, 2005; Smith, 2010). Debate arises from two differing perspectives: one that is focussed upon domination or 'power over', and one that concentrates on empowerment or 'power to' (Tew, 2006). According to Haugaard (2010), power consists of an array of concepts, with each concept contributing something to understanding power. He, therefore, suggests that different concepts of power need not be mutually exclusive, and the academic pursuit of a singular 'best' definition of power is fundamentally flawed. Haugaard acknowledges, that some theorists may not sit comfortably with pluralistic views of power, and points to constructivist rhetoric, whereby if power means many things, then does it mean anything at all?

It is therefore important to be mindful of how disparate power theories describe important dimensions of power; whilst also acknowledging that they cannot be melded together in a straightforward manner. Take for example the works of Lukes (2005) and Foucault (1980, 1982); despite both theorists being postmodernist in their approach, there is a clear difference in terms of how they understand and describe power. For example, Lukes essentially considers power to flow from a source, within his three-dimensional account of power, which highlights how decision making, agenda setting and ideological/thought control is the means by which power is exercised. Whilst on

the other hand, Foucault (1982) regards power as relational and fluid in its manifestation, rather than something which is possessed and exercised. Another example is how similarly to Foucault, Lukes considers ideology and knowledge as being central to shaping how people understand themselves and their interests/desires. However, unlike Foucault, Lukes (2018) maintains the existence of 'truth', that ideology obscures and power endangers; whereas Foucault (1980), contends that power and truth have an almost symbiotic relationship.

Haugaard (2010) explains that the variance between different theories of power can be likened to the idea of a 'family resemblance', with the impossibility of a definitive 'family member'. Carrying the analogy further, the possibility of drawing upon different 'family members', according to context, is a more useful venture than adhering to a more dominant theory that does not quite fit the phenomenon. Applied to practice, Haugaard's argument suggests that by understanding concepts of power as tools, we can assess whether any given concept is useful in making sense of the phenomenon at hand. In order to create a conceptual tool 'fit for purpose', there are two particular points which are key: First, the objective of the conceptual tool must be clearly articulated. Second, consideration should be offered to the paradigm from which the conceptual tool stems. With regards to the latter, he argues that the defensibility of using one conceptual tool over another, is linked to the validity of the paradigm from which it stems. As such, the paradigm in which the concept is embedded, must be rigorously evaluated to ensure a coherent and valid foundation exists. Linking this back to social work then, we see how social work practice is enveloped by a range of paradigms (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). However, what remains common across paradigms is the understanding that social work is inextricably linked with a commitment to social justice (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This commitment to social justice, therefore, demands that social workers understand how power relations impact on practice (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

Social work and power

The social work profession operates within a range of domains and has a breadth of micro and macro practices enabling it to influence change on various levels (Bent-Goodley, 2014); with power and its impact understood to be embedded within everyday social work practice. Smith (2008) considers three main sources that legitimate social workers' exercise of power: their professional standing via accrediting bodies for social work, legislation and policies, and a social workers personal credibility and characteristics. Whilst power dynamics within social work practice, are said to be dependent upon the interaction between the social workers' identity, authority and those with whom they interact.

It has been suggested that social workers not only need to understand power in terms of their ability to act, but also require an understanding of how it can be exercised, based on assumptions and beliefs about given individuals (Pullen-Sansaçon & Cowden, 2012). The idea of power relations has therefore also been considered on various levels within social work, when power is exercised wittingly and unwittingly to oppress and discriminate against individuals and communities (Thompson, 2016). However, the exercise of power is not solely considered as something which is negative or limiting, as the positive

and productive uses of power are also acknowledged within social work theory (Adams, 2008; Tew, 2002).

A range of sociological theories of power have influenced how power is understood within the social work context, with authors referring to various conceptualisations of power which have inspired the development of their work. For example, Foucauldian thinking has influenced social work understandings of power and its positive applications (Thompson, 2007). Whilst Feminist perspectives of power over, power of, and power to, have also influenced theoretical developments (see Dominelli, 2002b); encouraging social workers to explore how power is negotiated and re-negotiated via social interactions (Dominelli, 2002a). Such influences of sociological theory on power constructs within social work have resulted in an additional layer of complexity, due to the issues surrounding theoretical paradigm shifts. However, the fact that paradigms shift and are used within different contexts, need not be problematic in such ways, and issues only arise when the validity of the paradigm being used or transferred is not clearly articulated, or is unfit for its intended purpose (Haugaard, 2010), i.e., it does not explain the phenomenon in question.

Social work and empowerment

The British Association of Social Work, Code of Ethics (British Association of Social Work, 2021) grounds social work practice within frameworks of social justice and empowerment, with a call for social work professionals to work in anti-oppressive ways (Burke & Harrison, 2002). Pragmatically however, such concepts do not always sit easily with practitioners who may feel uncomfortable with the more oppressive aspects of their work, with the exercise of power often being ambiguous in its nature (Smith, 2010). This is because, the authority invested in the social work role, creates possibilities for power imbalances between professionals and clients/service users. Therefore, a critical awareness of the care/control debate is required, in order to enable the social work profession to aspire to its altruistic intentions of empowering others (Dominelli, 2002b).

Notions of empowerment and anti-oppressive practice sit squarely within debates on how social work can engage in more egalitarian solutions to promote social justice. With regards to an individual's experience of oppression, a sense of powerlessness may arise from three interconnected sources: Firstly, negative self-imagery, secondly, experiences when engaging with external systems and thirdly, systems that undermine personal agency. It is argued that anti-oppressive practice can only be effective if these aspects are effectively managed (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). In addressing these factors, social workers need to recognise and work with complex power relations present within society (Leonardsen, 2007). Despite the need for an approach which appreciates both individual and structural factors (Mullaly, 2006), efforts to affect change tend to be more geared towards the former as opposed to the latter (Smith, 2008). Therefore, acting in ways to promote the empowerment of individuals within the context of social work is not easily achieved.

Indeed, theorists have also recognised the pitfalls which are present in processes of empowerment. Alongside more positive presentations of empowerment, the potentially

disempowering experience of empowerment, has also been acknowledged (Fook, 2016). There remain ambiguities within the social work agenda (Parton, 1985), as social work is recognised as encompassing actions and praxis which facilitate both care and control. As a result, it is important for social workers to be cognizant of the broader limiting impact of exercising power. Another example of the ambiguity present within the social work agenda is that of decision making, in terms of who will or will not be helped and in which circumstance, which leads to interpretations of who may be 'deserving' or 'undeserving' (Dominelli, 2002b).

A series of structures and relationships are visible within social work which involves the regulation and transmission of power (Smith, 2008). The 'bottom-up' view of power may well aid our understanding of the expression of power within the context of everyday relations and support practice (Fook, 2016). It is increasingly recognised how change on a number of levels (with individuals, families, communities, and structures) can be affected by those who are able to recognise and connect their individual condition to the society within which they exist (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). Empowerment is therefore connected to a range of contexts and the recognition of 'sites of power' is integral to affecting change. Arguably, this explains why some social work theorists who consider empowerment, have developed frameworks which refer to both the impact of power and the level at which it is exercised (Smith, 2010; Thompson, 2016). The range of social work theories available on power are valuable, as they offer specific explanations of what power is, as a family resemblance concept (Haugaard, 2010), to contribute to broader understandings on the subject.

Social work frameworks of power and empowerment

Rowlands (1995) recognised empowerment as a complex process, particularly because the root-concept of power is disputed. She proposed, that using the term 'empowerment' carelessly, may well mask the realities of how power is actually being exercised. Therefore, practitioners need to be cognizant of how power operates during processes of empowerment, to ensure that interventions are indeed empowering. Within social work, a number of frameworks have been developed to explain power and empowerment. Thompson (2016) offered the PCS (personal, cultural and structural) model to depict the domains within which oppression occurs and power manifests, and provides an analytical framework which remains significant in social work, particularly when considering subjects such as social exclusion (Lee, 2022).

The PCS framework suggests that oppression and discrimination operate on three levels: the personal or psychological (P); the cultural (C) and the structural (S). Thompson suggests that there is an interaction between levels where they influence one another, and also contends that acts of discrimination can be the result of 'commission and omission', in other words, demonstrated through action and inaction. A particular advantage of the PCS model is apparent in how it goes beyond the individual level, to consider wider contexts in which power operates. However, as the model focuses on discrimination and oppression, the positive impact of the exercise of power, irrespective of which level such power is exercised on, is not captured. Whilst in his other works,

Thompson (2007) does consider how drawing on the positive aspects of power, allows for empowerment, the focus of the PCS framework does not easily align with such observations. There has also been some critique of the PCS model, which advocates for the need to speak more to the lived experience, rather than to relatively abstract models (Singh, 2012).

Dominelli (2002b) also offers a framework, with which to consider power and influence. The client, family, community, national and international domains are highlighted, with the physical, psychosocial, economic and spiritual all being said to create influence. She highlights how anti-oppressive practice would seek to address these power relations to facilitate the self-empowerment of individuals, because empowerment cannot be 'done to' individuals, only facilitated. Dominelli (2002b) refers to French's (1985) Feminist ontology of power, and makes distinctions between three aspects of power, namely that of 'power over', 'power to', and 'power of'. 'Power over' is said to be related to individual or collective notions of dominance and power over others. 'Power to' is indicative of individually or collectively transformative power which may resist 'power over' in oppressive situations. And finally, 'power of' is explained as a collective endeavour to achieve any given common objective. Dominelli (2002b) therefore recognises how power can be used for both positive and negative purposes.

Linking his work to that of both Thompson (2016) and Dominelli (2002b), Smith (2008) also provides a framework with which to understand power within social work practice. He proposes that understanding power via a consideration of the representations of power, modes of power and sites of power may help reframe our understanding. Within representations of power, Smith (2008) proposes that there are four ways in which power may be understood, this is as: potential, possession, process, or as a product. In terms of modes of power, Smith (2004) asserts that to consider the personal, positional and relational is most fitting within a social work context. Also, his argument suggests that as the sites of power differ, then so do power relations in any given situation.

In a more specific context, when thinking about the realms of influence (and therefore sites of power) which impact upon children, Smith (2004) offers an alternative framework. Smith's framework is similar to Dominelli's (2002b) proposal, but distinct in its representation of what forces impact upon domains, in light of his focus on children. In this way, Smith (2004) is able to offer two distinct frameworks which, despite overlap, are unique and valuable in relation to the context under scrutiny; and may be considered two additional understandings of power.

Both Dominelli (2002b) and Smith (2004) offer a higher level of complexity within their frameworks as compared to Thompson (2016), with a more detailed set of influences being reflected. And despite their similarities and differences, collectively, such examples highlight the importance of the diversity of power relations which are present in varying contexts; and therefore illustrate the value of applying an analytical framework which may articulate the complexities present, when considering the operation of power within different scenarios.

To address the perceived deficit in historic understandings of power within social work, an alternative framework which considers power is offered by Tew (2002, 2006). The 'Matrix of Power Relations', considers productive and limiting power, and connects this with protective and oppressive power, which manifests individually or collectively. The framework is particularly adept at capturing the potential positive and

negative exercises of power, as well as the difference in power relations when power is either individually or collectively exercised. Furthermore, as a framework, it is not limited to focussing upon a specific group of individuals or a single dimension and may be more universally applied within social work practice.

However, although Tew (2006) identifies how the exercise of power may be contradictory in terms of its oppressive/limiting nature in some instances, whilst being protective/productive elsewhere, any co-occurrence of the limiting and productive exercise of power is not examined. Instead, Tew speaks of the shift between the two expressions of power, moving from productive to limiting, or from limiting to productive. Therefore, in applying the framework as is, it is possible to capture the limiting and productive modes of power separately, but not simultaneously. Likewise, this remains the case with regards to the power frameworks offered by Thompson (2016), Dominelli (2002b) and Smith (2004, 2008).

By exploring existing frameworks of power within a social work context, we see that a framework which captures power as a synchronous concept remains absent from social work theory and practice. The Power-informed Practice (PiP) framework was developed to address this gap (Karim, 2020). The PiP framework remains located within social work paradigms of empowerment yet borrows from wider sources of knowledge in order to contribute what Haugaard (2010) would consider another family member to understandings of power as a family resemblance concept. The PiP framework (discussed ahead) builds upon the way in which power has previously been conceptualised and offers an analytical tool which may be useful in advancing both social work theory and practice.

The Power-informed Practice (PiP) framework

Within the Power-informed Practice (PiP) framework (Figure 1), power is understood to be expressed within human action and inaction, which may or may not be facilitated through mechanisms and processes. Although these terms are complex, social theorists recognise power in action (Foucault, 1982) as well as within inaction (Lukes, 2005). This is similarly the case for social work academics who refer to both instances (Dominelli, 2002b; Tew, 2002). The complexities of what constitutes action and inaction are examined by Feldman et al. (2020). However, for the purpose of this framework, it suffices to understand that action is simply ‘to do’, whilst inaction is ‘not to do’,

Figure 1. The Power-informed Practice (PiP) Framework.

I	Limiting	Limiting/Productive	Productive	I
P	Limiting	Limiting/Productive	Productive	P
S	Limiting	Limiting/Productive	Productive	S

because the impact of power channelled through action and inaction is of greater significance here.

The framework depicts the ways in which power manifests on an individual/personal, professional/institutional and structural/societal level in order to impact on individuals in limiting, productive, or limiting/productive ways synchronously. As it is recognised, that the key to understanding power, is to determine how it is exercised and experienced at different levels (Fook, 2016). Within the framework, the individual/personal level (I) refers to individual exercises of power on a micro level, which is accessible to every individual who is able to act with choice. The professional/institutional (P) mezzo level refers to power exercised by professionals and institutions based on the authority vested in them by the state or community. Whilst, finally, the structural/societal (S) macro level denotes the exercise of power informed by the socio-political dimension. In particular, the structural/societal level refers to the power exercised in ways that impact society at large, or on particular groups within society, which extend beyond the singular.

Individual/personal level (i)

On the I level within the framework, the individual is synonymous with the idea of the personal, due to the way in which the ‘personal’ exists in relation to a particular person or persons and belongs to them individually. That is, power is not conferred upon the person, but exists because they exist. Consequently, it is recognised that individuals hold a level of personal power in and amongst themselves, which they are able to exercise in relation to themselves and/or others depending upon the context. Perhaps most notably, the significance of the individual exercise of power was highlighted by Foucault (1982) who understood power to be formed from the infinitesimal, rather than simply located within large-scale mechanisms of the state. Commonly understood definitions of power on an individual level are how, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957, p. 202), or possessing the ability to control resources (Galinsky et al., 2003). The individual exercise of power within the framework therefore, signifies personal power which is exercised in relation to oneself and others.

Professional/institutional level (p)

On the P level within the framework, combining notions of the ‘professional’ and ‘institutional’ exercise of power may be viewed as problematic due to the perceived distinctiveness of terms. However, it is argued that institutions do not create themselves and nor as physical structures (if we see them as such) do they autonomously and unilaterally exercise power. Instead, it is only by virtue of their professional authority, that they are created and contain within them praxis which have been sanctioned. On this level within the PiP framework therefore, the professional and institutional have been combined for a specific purpose – to highlight how professionals and their respective institutions, are able to deploy power based on their professional status. As a result, whether the

exercise of power stems from the behaviour of individuals, or is exercised collectively, or is the result of the systems which have been created within institutions; power in this context remains professional power.

The work of Weber (1920/1947) on power and authority is particularly useful in considering how power operates professionally; with the power vested in professionals and the opportunity for the extension of such power through institutions to become manifest. 'Pure' types of legitimate authority according to Weber are based on rational-legal, traditional and charismatic grounds. Weber believed that irrespective of the authority type being obeyed, the willingness of people to obey is based on beliefs that lend prestige to those with authority, which offers legitimacy. Weber's theory on the grounds for legitimacy was further expanded, via his exploration of the concept of bureaucracy. Weber's view of bureaucracy was that of a system of power based on discipline, whereby leaders exercise control over others using the rational-legal form of legitimated authority. Rational grounds for authority, rest upon the belief in the legality and rights of those elevated to positions of power to dictate or issue commands (Weber, 1920/1947). Such insights bring to light the inextricable relationships between authority, power and entitlement. The professional exercise of power within the PiP framework therefore, refers to professionals and their respective institutions which are afforded power in ways which others are not.

Structural/societal level (s)

The structural and societal are brought together within the PiP framework at the S level, which refers to the power exercised in ways that may impact on society at large or at the very least, on groups within society which extend beyond any singular institution. The exercise of such power can be attributed to broad social and structural mechanisms which can impact on the lives of many, if not all individuals within society in similar ways. The structural and societal level exercise of power here also, refers to the overarching social arrangements present within society, which may be reflected or perpetuated by the culture present, or the social attitudes which exist and prevail.

Within the context of the PiP framework, social structures are not considered to be objective entities wielding power in ways that are devoid of human influence. Giddens (1984) explains this when considering the dialectic of control present in social systems. He explores the connection between action and structure suggesting that a 'duality of structure' exists, whereby structure and agency are interdependent, and both inform and reinforce one another. Accordingly, systems are the activities of individuals and patterns of social relations, whilst structures are the rules and resources available to individuals which recreate systems, including for example, social class and political structures. Giddens (1984) recognised structures as both enabling and constraining, which may be translated as structures possessing productive and limiting qualities as per the PiP framework. Mechanisms such as the law, policy and other phenomenon which shape, relate to or influence society in a broad sense, are therefore located at the structural/societal (S) level within the framework.

Applying the PiP framework to practice: Exercises of power and child abuse

Let us now examine how the PiP framework may be applied to practice, by imagining a scenario where a social worker becomes involved in the life of a young person who goes missing from home, because they are being physically abused by their parents. In this scenario, the physical abuse in itself is an expression of the individual exercise of limiting power, as it is recognised that child abuse involves perpetrators abusing power (Itzin, 2000), which exacerbates the marginalisation and disempowerment of children (Sloman & Taylor, 2016). Early intervention is key in this situation, as the biopsychosocial consequences of child abuse manifest in complex ways through the life course (Coates, 2010). As an example, research highlights how adult victims/survivors of child abuse may adopt unhealthy coping strategies through the use of substances (Dube et al., 2003) or self-harm (Gratz, 2003); which resonate with the individual exercise of simultaneously limiting/productive power. For social workers who become involved in the lives of children who are experiencing abuse therefore, it is essential that the impact of power being channelled through interventions and decision making relating to children is carefully examined. Because as we know, the consequences can be lifelong for individuals if social work practice is not informed by an understanding of power and its impact.

The first thing to consider in this scenario is the power dynamics between adults and children, whereby children are less powerful than adults on an individual level (in terms of age and dependency), as well as on a structural level (due to prevalent social attitudes around the status of children). Such power relations may be so normalised within the home environment that the child may not recognise the abuse they are being subjected to, particularly where physical chastisement to some degree remains permissible in most parts of the world, as an example of limiting structural power. However, if the child is aware that the abuse they are experiencing is unacceptable, they may possess limited strategies to resist or challenge the situation. In their attempts to exercise limited, yet individual productive power, the young person may have questioned their parents as to why they are being assaulted, however this may not have resulted in any change. They may therefore be inclined to use other methods to try to cope with the situation. As a means of escape, the young person may go missing from home often, where they may be safe from the abuse itself, but expose themselves to equal or greater risk elsewhere. Leaving the abusive home environment in this way would therefore be an example of the young person exercising their individual, simultaneously limiting/productive power.

If police officers came across the young person who was away from home, and questioned them based on their concerns around safety, this would exemplify the exercise of professional productive power. However, if the young person exercised individual productive power by disclosing that they were being physically abused at home, but this cry for help was dismissed by the police as being untrue or insignificant, then this would demonstrate professional limiting power. Professionals disregarding disclosures is not uncommon, as it has been noted that children can be proactive in terms of

disclosing abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Karim, 2017), however such disclosures are not necessarily responded to appropriately by professionals (Karim, 2017).

Professionals may therefore become complicit in situations where children are being physically abused in their home environments, as an expression of the exercise of limiting professional power. Professionals may not for example, consider physical abuse a priority area, particularly where other social problems are more prominent (war, poverty, etc.); or when smacking or beating a child is not recognised as an issue which requires professional intervention. Such views can be understood, when we recognise that child abuse is socially constructed, via shifts in knowledge and discourse pertaining to children over time (Bell, 2011). Understandings of truth, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1980) help make sense of how defining child abuse remains contingent upon consensual beliefs around appropriate and inappropriate behaviours towards children (Bell, 2011). This complexity is further increased with an awareness of how understanding 'abuse' is inextricable from the cultural context within which it is located (Fontes, 2008; Korbin, 2002), whilst 'believing' that abuse has occurred may be impeded by the links between diversity and oppression (Singh, 2012). Hence, if in this current scenario, the young person was from an ethnic minority background, and/or had a disability; the prospect of the young person being believed would be further diminished. As a result, the 'truth' of what constitutes child abuse, is dependent upon the power of shared meanings and understandings as they evolve within specific cultural contexts.

Alternatively, in this scenario, if the police did believe the young person and escorted them back home with a view to investigate the situation, they would be exercising professional productive power. However, because the abuse suffered by children is said to be reflective of social attitudes (Colton et al., 2002), parents may be able to justify physical acts of violence towards the young person, by locating the problem with the child and claiming that physical chastisement was necessary to correct undesirable behaviour. In doing so, parents would be using individual limiting power, within the context of structural limiting power which encompasses social attitudes which allow for the justification of such exercises of individual power. On the other hand, if in this situation, the police made a referral to social services, it would again demonstrate professional productive power. This referral may be propelled by structural productive power, where country specific legislation may exist which is geared towards the protection of children. Or there may be more universal subscriptions to children's' rights to safety, as is the case with the UN, who advocate for the prohibition of 'reasonable chastisement' (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016).

Following the referral to social services, the young person may present as being conflicted, or unsure of what to share of their experiences with the social worker. With professionals now involved, the potential consequences of external intervention may frighten the young person. Social workers need to remember, that from the perspective of the child, parents may represent people to be loved and feared simultaneously due to the nature of their familial relationship. Children may well internalise feelings of wanting to please their parents, whilst fearing them, as adults in the lives of children can be perceived as dangerous or even negligent in their duties to protect (Herman, 1992). As a consequence, children may limit themselves to having 'arms-length' interactions, which lack

trust. The young person in question therefore, may want to have an open and honest conversation with the social worker, but this desire may well be located alongside an instinct to protect themselves from harm. Ensuring everyone remains at a safe distance, would be synonymous with the child exercising their individual limiting/productive power. If this was the case in the given scenario, the social worker would need to understand the internal conflict present for the young person and work with them to build trust.

Building trust, would require the social worker to recognise the difficulties present for the young person and acknowledge these as part of any intervention. The child may be afraid of displeasing their parents, or worse, they may be afraid that they will never see them again. Social workers are often tasked with ensuring that children are removed from environments where their safety is in question (Flynn & Starns, 2004), however, young people may not want to leave their families due to conflicted feelings surrounding the care they receive, versus the abuse they are being subjected to. As a result, children who are being removed from their familial homes as a protective measure, may experience this as being an expression of simultaneously limiting/productive professional power.

The fear of the unknown may also render prospects of alternative care a source of distress for the young person, as such transitions often require children to leave their home, school, community, and their friends behind. We also know, that some placements for children continue to be deemed unfit for purpose (Gypen et al., 2017), and that children may be removed from abusive homes, only to experience further abuse within the care system (Ferguson, 2007). In such circumstances, it could be said, that social workers exercise professional limiting/productive power, due to the synchronous positive and negative impact apparent for children. On the one hand, children are removed from unsafe home environments, whilst on the other hand, they are exposed to further abuse and/or distress elsewhere.

As a way of mitigating such fears and risks, the wishes and feelings of the young person within the case scenario should be sought, and their views should inform the social workers assessment, as a demonstration of professional productive power. This consultation may well result in the young person exercising their individual productive power, if they were to request to be placed under the supervision of other family members, rather than being removed to reside in state care facilities. However, if the option of kinship care was not available legally (despite the existence of statutory powers to protect children from harm via removal) then this would denote the structural limiting/productive exercise of power. As Roche (2001) highlights, the law as an all-encompassing mechanism appears ill equipped to deal with the nuances present for individuals in society.

Let us imagine that kinship care was actually a viable option, and that the young person was placed safely with their grandparents. Once the relocation process is complete, the young person may still express their wish to return home when it is safe to do so. The task for the social worker would then be to explore how to work with both parents and the young person, to address and reconfigure power relations. Initially, it would be important for the social worker to address the immediate support needs of the young person, in attempts to facilitate empowerment. The young person may for example, be referred for therapeutic support, which would evidence the productive

exercise of professional power. Accessing therapy can help individuals who have experienced abuse to better regulate their emotional state (Ramchandani & Jones, 2003; Sanderson, 2006), with the client-professional relationship being central to the benefits individuals experience (Grossman et al., 2017).

Simultaneously, parents could be educated on the impact of physical violence towards children and be referred for parenting support, through which they would be able to develop their parenting skills and have the opportunity to re-evaluate their child rearing practices. If the planned interventions with both the young person and their parents was successful, then reunification may be possible in the longer term, but on more egalitarian terms with regards to power. To achieve this, the social worker would need to facilitate the redistribution of power throughout their involvement with the family, so that parents can no longer remain supremely powerful, whilst the young person holds limited power. One way that this may be achieved is via the child's grandparents who stepped in to offer their care and support. Arrangements pertaining to shared parenting could be introduced with grandparents if the young person was to return home. If this was legally possible, then this would demonstrate the exercise of productive structural power. Other strategies may include a continuation of social work oversight, to monitor and review the situation for the young person in an expression of professional productive power. Because avenues to be listened to and be supported would now exist for the young person, both alternate family members and the social worker would provide a means for the young person to wield additional individual power.

Critical to the entire intervention, would be for the social worker to ensure that the young person is offered the appropriate opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making. This in turn would help the young person counteract at least some of the powerlessness they experienced within the abusive home setting. However, the social worker would need to continue to be mindful of the differences between the young person's individual power and the professional power they as a social worker have access to. This would ensure that considerations of power remain at the forefront of any intervention, and that a situation which recreated or fuelled power differences could be mitigated.

Limitations and implications for future research

This review has highlighted gaps within current understandings of power and its impact within a social work context and has also led to the development of a framework which attempts to respond to the need to consider power in a more nuanced way; particularly where social work professionals endeavour to empower others. At a theoretical level, it has been argued that social work professionals need to recognise the levels at which power operates, and understand how this can be productive, limiting and simultaneously limiting/productive in some situations. However, the review is predominantly based on Western concepts of power, with an emphasis on social work literature stemming from the UK, which was available in English. Therefore, a significant limitation of the review is the literature it was actually based on. In an academic world where we are beginning to consider the decolonisation of research (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), it is important to acknowledge such limitations. Consequently, further research

on power, should include non-western perspectives as well as literature which is not available in the English language.

In addition to this, it is also imperative for social work researchers and theorists to pay greater attention to concepts of power, as much of the literature which specifically focuses on power from social work perspectives is dated. This may be reflective of how thinking about power does not always sit easily with social workers, because power as a subject is difficult. The often-ambiguous nature of power is challenging to grasp (Smith, 2010), and as a result, social workers may experience a heightened sense of antipathy when it comes to reckoning with power. Other factors contributing to difficulties in thinking about power include the broadness/narrowness of definitions, the term being value-laden and a perceived preoccupation with measuring power rather than understanding its meaning (Bar-On, 2002); therefore, more needs to be done to make 'power' as accessible as possible.

By offering the PiP framework, this review has attempted to respond to this need; nevertheless, it is recognised that this may still not be an easy read for practitioners, which highlights another limitation of this particular review. In a similar fashion to other frameworks stemming from social work theory on power, it is important to be mindful of some of the challenges the PiP framework may present in practice. Critical reflection is required to ensure that when social workers make judgements around what is limiting, productive or both in terms of the exercise of power, that it is based on the best possible evidence. Social workers may feel at unease about categorising the good, bad and duality of power within situations and therefore a limitation of the framework itself, is the need to undertake such a task. Nevertheless, because of how important power is within social work, it is essential for researchers to embrace the challenges of investigating, understanding, and presenting power. As if we are unable to, the power of the complexity of power, may arguably limit the development of power-informed theory and practice in social work.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the existing social work literature on power and has extended this analysis to consider broader sociological conceptualisations of power in order to support social work professionals to understand and work with power in practice. The review has argued that prevailing theories and frameworks of power which represent power as 'good or bad', 'positive or negative' and 'productive or limiting' are limiting in themselves. Through the course of the review, it has been argued that power must be recognised as a construct that also operates in a synchronous way, i.e., as simultaneously limiting/productive in some situations. To support this position, the Power-informed Practice (PiP) framework is offered to enable social workers to consider power at the individual, professional and structural levels. The utility of the framework in providing a deeper understanding of power in contemporary social work practice has been demonstrated in its application, on the subject of child abuse. Through the application of the framework, the individual/personal, institutional/professional and the structural/societal levels at which power can be exercised in limiting, productive or limiting/productive ways has been explained.

The discussion on power and child abuse, offers one example of how the framework can be applied to practice, however it is argued, that its utility extends beyond any single case scenario. For example, domestic violence, homelessness, elder abuse, or any other concerns which clients/service users may have, could also be analysed and worked with, through the lens of power which has been offered. It is suggested that social workers have a duty to embed this thinking within their day-to-day interactions with adults, children, and families, because social workers need to understand power and its impact more clearly, to ensure their practice is indeed anti-oppressive and empowering. This may be easily achieved, if social workers are supported in thinking through power within education, assessment, intervention and supervisory processes.

Being cognizant of how power may have a limiting, productive or a synchronously limiting/productive impact; it no longer suffices to say that social work practice can be 'empowering or disempowering', 'enabling or disabling' and 'anti-oppressive or oppressive'. With greater clarity around the often simultaneously positive and negative impact of power, it is imperative that social workers reflect on practice in more nuanced and meaningful ways. This is particularly significant, when we recognise that in social work practice, we exercise power by virtue of our professional standing, and for clients/service users at least, we epitomise the professional exercise of power, either in limiting, productive or limiting/productive ways. These are important implications for both social work education and social work practice, and the PiP framework offers a useful tool with which to recognise and understand power, to enable practitioners to work in a more power-informed way.

Ethics

The undertaking of this literature review did not require ethical approval.


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