

# HEALTH AND POWER

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Over the next few days, we are going to look at some health related topics and ask some questions about them - questions such as

- Why was Florence Nightingale, the founder of the nursing profession, such a powerful person?
- Why do Aborigines have an average life expectancy 20 years shorter than other Australians?
- Why do people in poorer areas of the big cities have an average life expectancy that is 10 years less than people in wealthier areas?
- In Australia we spend around \$60 billion dollars a year on health care. So why does only 5c in every dollar go towards prevention of disease while the other 95c is used for curing disease?
- Are hospitals places for the care and cure of the sick - or are they sites for the exercise of political and economic power?
- Why is alternative medicine becoming so popular?
- Why are most babies in Australia born in hospitals rather than at home?

As we look at these questions, we shall see that POWER figures prominently in the answers to all of them. And as we go through the Course, you will be asked to think about the POWER DIMENSIONS of the issues we investigate.

However, most people do not associate health and health care with power. Surely, it may be asked, the care and cure of the sick could do without these "sleaze factors"?

That kind of thinking is understandable, since power can be destructive. Yet in itself, power is morally neutral and can be used for good as well as evil purposes. Without power, nothing gets done. Power itself is not the problem; it is the way that it is used or abused that may be problematic.

So what is power? There are many definitions. The American political scholar Robert Dahl, put it this way: "A has power over B to the extent that he [sic] can get B to do something B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1962). While this is basically good enough, it does not go far enough. Another similar, but more subtle definition was that given by the great German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) who succinctly described power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [sic] will despite resistance" (Weber, 1922).

In more recent times, one of the best discussions of power has been that provided by Steven Lukes of the University of New York. In a slim volume

which has had great influence (1975), Lukes did not try to define power in one sentence or one paragraph. Instead he proposed that power had to be understood in three dimensions. These are what I will call

1. **Overt power**
2. **Covert power**
3. **"Power-free" power.**

Let's look at each of these in turn:

## 1. Overt power

By this is meant power which is actively and consciously used by those who wield it. There are many types of overt power. Here are a few examples:

### *a. Position power*

This is a very important and "powerful" type of power which Weber described as "legal/rational power". This is the type of power which is conferred on people or leaders by appoint or election, which means that others are *legally* obliged to obey them. The CEO in a company, the commander-in-chief of an army, the captain of a sports team, wield this kind of power, and those who ignore or refuse to obey their superiors, can suffer severe penalties.

### *b. Charismatic power*

This is the kind of power exercised by individuals because others "believe in them" because they are seen to have attractive or leadership qualities. Great leaders generally have this kind of power in large degree. One major example in the modern world is that of Nelson Mandela, possibly one of the honoured and revered leaders in human history. Others, like Adolf Hitler, have exercised this kind of power in an evil and destructive fashion.

### *c. Combination power*

Here it is not individuals but people acting together to secure a certain objective or to resist something being imposed on them. This is one of the most effective sources of power available to people who are "further down" the power pyramid. Trade unions are one of the most obvious examples of Combination Power.

### *d. Financial and reward power*

Financial power is a very obvious kind of power. But while the golden rule here seems to be that those who have the gold make the rules (!) this does not apply simply to amount of money a person may possess; it also applies those situations where a person or a corporate body has access to finances and has the right to use those resources as they see fit. This is coupled with reward power; being able to offer people or groups rewards is just as potent a source of power.

*e. Information power*

Having information not available to your opponents invariably puts you at an advantage. This is a type of power that those lower the pyramid of power often have and which the bosses lack simply because organisations are too large and complex for bosses to understand and know about all their operations. Thus information can be used to counteract the position power of the bosses.

*f. Expert power*

This is similar to Information Power but is also different. The knowledge of how things work obviously confers great advantages on the expert, particularly when that form of expertise is scarce and in demand. A prime example is the power of the medical profession. Although representing only a tiny fraction of the total population and indeed of the total number of people working in the health field, as you will see in the reading on "The Rise and Rise of the Medical Profession", doctors have none the less wielded and still wield extraordinary power in society.

*g. Network power*

May be summed up in the old saying: It's not what you know who you know that counts. Having friends and allies in the right places can be a great source of power.

*h. Negative power*

Negative power is the capacity to stop things happening, or to delay, distort or disrupt them. The clerk who sorts the mail has little or no legal/rational power, but she/he can misdirect, mislay or destroy important documents. Her/his power to block or distort, means that their negative power is often out of the proportion to their position. In government departments, in the offices of big companies, office workers often "lose" a file (Handy, 1976) relating to some important issues, printers mysteriously refuse to print, photocopiers to copy at crucial moments. There is little bosses can do about these situations.

*i. Physical power*

It is possible to wield power by threatening people with violence if they fail to do what somebody stronger than them wants. Among the chief wielders of this kind of power in economically advanced society is the Mafia or the *Yakuza* in Japan. Crossing them means you are likely to end up with your feet in a block of cement at the bottom of the sea. The constraint on this type of power is that it is dangerous not only for the victim, but for the perpetrators or violence. The "Godfather" movies about the Mafia illustrate this point very well.

## **2. Covert power**

In contrast to overt power, covert power is not obvious and it is not actively used. It is simply there. However, despite its "hidden" nature, people will be conscious of its existence and in Weber's words it enables someone or something "within a social relationship ...to carry out his [sic] will despite resistance" (Weber, 1922). The example of this kind of power put forward by Lukes was that of the United Steel company and the town of Gary, Indiana, USA. The company ran a major steel-making plant in the town which caused enormous pollution and that in turn did much damage to peoples' health.

However, for over fifty years the subject of the environmental pollution and degradation caused by the United Steel plant was never once discussed by the City Council. The reason of course was that the Council did not want to offend or seem to threaten the owners of United Steel whose plant provided the economic lifeblood of Gary. Thus, although they never actively or consciously used any kind of overt power, United Steel was still much more powerful than the people and the City Council of Gary.

More examples of covert power in an Australian health context, are given in the article in Section 5 entitled "Hospitals as Centres of Power" which is one of your Overnight Readings on Wednesday.

## **3. "Power-free" power**

This seemingly contradictory type of power, said Lukes, is in fact the most powerful of all. It exists even when there is no "a" forcing "b" to do what he/she would not otherwise do, as in Dahl's definition, and there is no resistance to what an actor within a social relationship wants someone else to do (Weber). Under this type of power people act in a certain way, not because they are forced to do so, but because they have been persuaded by either charismatic leaders or some system of belief, that what they are doing is right and moral or that there is no alternative.

Take for instance, the building of the pyramids in ancient Egypt. Archaeological evidence from the cemeteries of the pyramid builders shows that they were not slaves, as had long been supposed, but that they were what we would call today middle and upper class Egyptians. It is unlikely that the kings of Egypt (the Pharaohs) would have used overt power to force such people to become labourers. Rather they worked because of their belief that even after death the Pharaoh would help ensure prosperity for Egypt if his body was preserved in a splendid monument and so ensure that his spirit could continue to mediate between the people and the gods. Building pyramids thus contributed to the wellbeing of the whole nation and it was that ideal which motivated the builders.

There is also evidence that some of the building of the great cathedrals in Europe was done by wealthy, upper class volunteers. They worked not because the Church used its financial power to offer them rewards, but *ad majorem Dei gloria* - "to the greater glory of God". Lukes' conclusion was that the greatest power of all is that of ideas - power-free power. People will act when they are motivated and sometimes obsessed by strong ideas. When that is the case, there is no need to exert either overt or covert power to spur them into action.

Power-free power has very often been seen in extremely evil forms, such as among those Germans who during the Second World War believed that when they murdered millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and disabled people, they were benefiting humanity by eliminating weak and corrupt genetic stock. One of the most terrifying recent examples of power-free power was that exerted by the ideas that motivated hijackers to fly aircraft into the World Trade Centre in New York on 9/11/2001.

But not all power-free power is as sinister as this. People will perform heroic deeds, even sacrificing their lives, because of their love of country (patriotism). On a more everyday level, power-free power is used to help teams win in sport, while even at work, the best managers are those who are never seen to be using overt power, but get things done by inspiring loyalty and hard work among their staff. A boss who shouts at or bullies staff and is a poor manager.

Here it should be said that *Paradigms*, discussed in Section 2 of this Book of Readings, are one of the most powerful forms of power-free power since they represent *ideas* which are unquestioned and accepted as "the truth". This point will be extensively discussed in the childbirth section of this course.

## **Power is all pervasive**

It needs to be borne in mind that all three types of power described above, may be present in a single situation. Thus in the case of Gary, Indiana, described above, there was probably a good deal of network power (e.g. the bosses and Councillors playing golf together) which helped ensure that the issue of pollution was not considered by the Council. Another factor was that the inhabitants of the town for a long time thought that having a large steelworks in the city was a "good thing" - and that paradigm was not questioned either by the citizens or the Council.

Just about all human activities have some power dimension and this especially true of health in which, as we will see during this course, there are constant clashes and conflicts between those with not only different ideas or ideologies, but with different interests. This is particularly true because \$60 billion is spent on health in Australia each year, and the way this is used is bound to be at the root of many conflicts in which power is a deciding factor. In other words, Health and Power are inseparable.

## REFERENCES

Dahl, R. (1962). *Who Governs?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

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Weber, M. (1922). *Economy and Society; an outline of interpretive sociology* (4th ed). In G. R. a. C. Wittick (Ed.) (Vol. 2 vols). Berkeley: California. University of California Press (2nd Ed) 1978.