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Power Relations and Actor Perspectives

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POWER DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVES IN SERVICE USER OUTCOMES. A CASE STUDY OF A CENTRE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE

Introduction

Power relations exist everywhere. Each time we interact with someone, power is at play, but we are most times often unaware. Nonetheless, when we analyze these interactions, we see that power is just saliently present. Power transfuses everything we do; it permeates every relationship we have with anybody.

Power is not bad or good, but what we do with it and its effect on us afterward makes it either good or bad. Power relations are also evident at broader levels like the societal or organizational/institutional levels. With this, one can relate to being positioned in a particular setting.

Philosophy has attempted to offer guidance for living, and some of this guidance can be seen in the theories of discussion.

Case study

I had worked in an environment where service users were mainly required to be institutionalized to get the best treatment possible. It was a Centre for Psychological Medicine that managed either mentally ill persons, drug misusers/people with an addiction, or persons with dual diagnoses. Treatment of dual diagnosis in the Nigerian context is often offered in the same treatment facilities because, from past experiences, there is projections that a good percentage of persons in substance use treatment also have a mental disorder, and out of this population, another good percentage with mental disorder will at some point come down with substance use disorder. The Centre adopted the multi-disciplinary approach that enabled it, to a large extent, to reach its goal. Various departments worked together to ensure that service users received holistic care. The departments include Doctors, Social Work, Psychology, Occupational therapy, Physical and Health Education, Nursing, Chaplaincy, Kitchen, Security, and after-care.

Firstly, there was always a power play among professionals regarding whose role was more important and whose role had the most impact on service users, which became apparent during the ward rounds that held every Monday and Friday. One professional field would typically perceive another as a competitor or with less skill, completely forgetting service user priority with a goal for recovery in integrated treatment. For example, Social Workers experienced competition with

Psychologists in making alliances with service users. However, there were asymmetrical relations of power in the Organizational interface wherein the psychiatric profession has the upper hand in a society that sees medicine as more prestigious than any other profession. Next were the power relations in dispensing our duties as social workers as they would be in a co-production. This essay, however, would focus largely on the position of social work practice and service user(s)' (clients, clients' families, or carers) outcomes from differing perspectives and theories.

Application of theories

While attempting to relate some of the tenets of Michel Foucault's theory of power to my Social Work practice field experience and its consequences on service users, it would be equally helpful to talk about what power is and what power isn't. This is an essential aspect of Foucault's theory of power. In his discussion of power, Foucault presents it as a force that responds to the actions or activities of others. With this understanding, explaining power's critical role in every relationship will be easy.

This perception can be related to the Centre, where clients were either punished or rewarded for something they did or didn't do. There were set rules and expected forms of behaviour. Every morning, there was a community meeting that involved all resident clients and all staff members. These were client-led meetings that lasted for only 30 minutes. During this time, announcements were made by top management, and either staff or clients gave short performances. Words of affirmation, rewards, or punishment were applied where necessary. The social workers designed these punishments with an understanding of cognitive theory, where we had to be in charge of the process and ensure that our design fit well with recovery goals. According to Uggerhøj (2023) in a lecture delivered, increasing desired behaviour and reducing undesired behaviour is the aim of cognitive therapy in Social Work. The punishments, which were mainly a way of letting service users know that a particular behavior was undesirable, ranged from wearing bright-colored clothing (as clients were not required to wear uniforms) to having more sessions with their therapists. At this time, the person(s) spelling out the punishment might, for instance, be a very young staff to a much older client who simply is responding to the actions/activities of the client. More so, the Interactional perspective of my practice can be seen where, at different points, I spoke to clients about their punishments. I realized that clients did not like the fact that they were called out but also appreciated the fact that they were treated with dignity. Here, we can see that treatment is not

hindered by the misuse of the office of the service provider and that desired behaviour is learned. This assertion can further be strengthened by the teachings of Uggerhøj (2023) on the interactional perspective, 'the service users' perception and understanding as well as their societal connections is paramount.'

The problem, however, with this perception is that it makes us fixated on one perspective, overlooking the other workings of power. It makes power appear legalistic. This certainly is one way of understanding power, which invariably misrepresents the entire concept of power. To counter this concept, I'll just state here that power is not domination.

One might ask, what then is power?

It is worth noting that Foucault's writings in his power theory were significant in the historical conceptions of power, as seen in the mental settings of asylums and prison systems. For Foucault, power is Immanent (Foucault, 1980). It means that power is intangible and, therefore, cannot be seen yet so real and can be felt. It is an imminent force of nature inherent in every individual. Foucault draws an analogy of this with the microphysics and social world, where he compares the force of power with that of gravity. As stated earlier in this write-up, power is everywhere and plays a role in every human interaction at different levels.

Foucault states that power is intentional and non-subjective (Kreps 2016; Foucault 1980). By intentionality, Foucault explains that we have the power of free will to choose what we want and how we like it, but he explained that non-subjective forces control these choices.

About my experience, I have always had a friendly interaction leading to good rapport with my clients, primarily upon treatment planning, which often would go together with motivational interviewing and which might take a day, more days, or weeks depending on the client's stability. When a rapport is successfully built, clients would rather have me make decisions for them because of the level of trust they have built in me. However, I'd rather not exercise this power but remain ethical. I'll instead nurture, guide, and support them to be responsible and accountable. This allows me to remain objective while discharging my duties as a Social Worker and allowing clients to grow, particularly in their decision-making skills, enabling them always to make informed decisions and lead independent lives. On the flip side, the client also has the power to choose the course of his life, whether he wants me to take control of their life, or whether they want to feel my impact in their life etc. Nonetheless, only when they are certified to be fit can one expect that non-subjective

forces influence their use of power. More so, they have the power to accept rehabilitation or not even having stayed the required period in the Centre.

Again to Foucault (1980), power is resistant. Foucault sees resistance as something that is inward rather than outward. A primary piece of power dynamics is resistance; thus, power acts on free subjects. This will relate to me as a therapist working in a Centre for psychological medicine, and with a valid license to practice Social Work. On the one hand, I had the power to go against the ethics of my profession and act as I wanted, not minding the effect it would have on service users; on the other hand, I had the freedom to practice with the Cognitive perspective of Social Work in view. In a classroom lecture on the Cognitive theory of Social Work, the Social Worker is expected to be in control of the process, ensuring that the learning fits well with ideals and morals in society (Uggerhøj, 2023).

All of these bring us to the crust of Foucault's power theory, which is 'force relations'. Foucault (1978) went on to give a definition of power in his 'will to knowledge', which I understand to be a variety of forces in every relation. For instance, I would feel a pull of force when choosing what to wear to work. A form of dressing that would complement the nature of my work and ultimately add value to my service delivery since our dressing as social workers fosters that expert-client relationship. While deciding what to wear, I shift from considering the Centre's idea of fashion to my spouse's opinion, then my colleagues' opinion, and finally to my opinion of what I think fashion should be. These are the diversity of force relations Foucault was talking about. These forces do not stand alone; instead, they operate simultaneously. The process of force relations in the social world can be likened to diffusion in the world of science. These force relations do not remain fixed in an individual and do not function in isolation. They act on each other by supporting or fighting, which can bring about transformational or preservatory outcomes.

Looking again at the instance of me dressing up for work, you might see the opinion of my spouse and the dressing rules of the Centre supporting each other and, on the other hand, the views of my colleagues and what fashion should be supporting each other and all pulling me to a specific direction. These two groups of force relations might strongly oppose my desire to do what I want.

In contrast, Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of power is quite different. While Foucault approaches power as an innate, ever-present entity, Bourdieu approaches power as a culturally and societally induced entity. Bourdieu discusses this in four concepts: Habitus, capital, fields, and doxa. In his

introduction of the concept of habitus, he explains that it is created through interactions rather than individual processes that, of course, lead to a desired pattern that can be transferrable from one context to another but can also change over time and under unexpected circumstances (Bourdieu, 1984).

Habitus is not a result of one's free will or structures, as seen in my dressing up for work, but is created by some sort of interplay between my free will and the structure of my work environment over time. Having worked in this setting for several years, I can tell the story of careless or inappropriate dressing and the impact it has on the service users, clients, and clients' families alike.

Firstly, as human as I am, my dressing may be a way to boost my self-confidence since I have the liberty to express myself through my attire about Foucault's idea of power; on the other hand, it can lead to low self-esteem if I am poorly judged by my fashion sense which would, in turn, affect my quality of work on the clients. Just like the old saying, 'You cannot give what you do not have, 'I, therefore, cannot instil high self-esteem in my clients when I do not have it, especially in a situation where self-esteem is critical, particularly for the clients who abuse drugs.

Secondly is the issue of safety, which can make the service provider, which is me, vulnerable to some violence or harassment. If this happens, there are consequences for the client, which, to a great extent, would affect recovery goals.

Finally, and most importantly, is the cultural and religious conflict that comes with dressing in a typical Nigerian setting. Nigeria, as diverse as it is with multiple cultures and religions, has different meanings of appropriate or inappropriate dressing, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in a setting that welcomes all people for treatment to help them get well and become functional in society. From the foregoing, the Cognitive perspective is critical as it would enable staff to dress in a way that will do no harm, especially regarding good quality service delivery.

From the psychodynamic perspective, human behaviour is constituted by the movement and interactions in people's minds, and the relationship between the Social Worker and service user is expected to be professional (Uggerhøj, 2023). So, choosing to dress accordingly in this instance not only reduces harm, quality of service, and the client's submissive position but also empowers the clients.

In Foucault's final definition of power, he talks about the strategies with which power takes effect, and since his theory of power is bottom-top, he adopts the terms micro and macro (Neubauer, 1998). Again, going back to the instance of dressing up for work, we understand the theory from the realm of microphysics to that of culture, where he used tactics and strategies. The opinions of my spouse and colleagues are what Foucault would call tactics, which are actually local and micro and which would eventually cause a force in every relation, while the rules of the Centre on dressing with relation to its impact on service users are what he would refer to as macro. These views, together with other related ones, would form such formidability that would go on to be a major part of co-production and service user priority.

Referring again to Bourdieu, another important concept of his is the concept of capital, where he explains how capital can be converted into other forms and would not necessarily cause any form of economic control or hierarchy in the society (Ledwith and Springett, 2022; Bourdieu, 1984). This shift makes the causes of inequality in society not obvious. This concept shows how the organizational order, as partly seen in its organogram, progressively inscribed the values, judgments, and everyday activities of the Centre. This led to specific Social Workers thinking less of themselves about their relevance, ultimately affecting their work quality. They started to feel less important to the psychologists' nurses, and doctors, forgetting that we all formed a multi-disciplinary team with differing expertise that tended to create a system that would work for the full recovery of the service users. However, this was corrected when the management saw the need to redesign the organogram, although it seemed like the power play would exist for a longer time.

Yet another concept of Bourdieu's power theory is 'fields', which I best understand as a system with its sub-systems. This means that people respond to power depending on what field they find themselves in at the moment. As a daughter, sister, and wife in a typical African society that is majorly patriarchal, I yield at home, while as a Social Worker in my work environment, I had public authority where both colleagues and service users, irrespective of gender, yield to me. In the same way, power can change in the 'field' where a service user feels more powerful, especially when a Social Work service provider has always exercised power in the form of dominance.

The final concept of Bourdieu's power theory is 'doxa' which can be seen when we disregard the limits that create social differences and unequal structures (Bourdieu, 1984). Applying this concept, I can only think of egalitarianism where all members of staff, particularly those on the treatment

team, are equal in every sense of the word. This can be further explained when the lead doctor wants to know what each professional says about a client during the ward rounds. As a team member, I pitched from an interactional perspective by disregarding the limits in structure and always acting as an equal team member. By doing this, I learned the other facets of a client from the other professionals, thereby getting a better understanding of their care plan. This brought about some good collaboration amongst professionals on the treatment team which included trust, alternative perspectives on service user needs and opportunities, constructive criticisms, holistic care and ultimately, improved outcomes for service users. Moving further from the treatment team, the entire system should disregard 'doxa' to produce superior work and, ultimately, quality service delivery. Significantly, the Security department is not less important than the Social Work department and the Psychology department is not more important than the Kitchen. So is the Nursing department not more critical than Chaplaincy and on the list goes?

Conclusion

This essay has presented a practical application of two theories of power and three Social Work perspectives cum theories that relate to service user outcomes. The application of these theories shows that they are not abstract but can apply to our everyday lives. The data source for this essay stems from my experience as a therapist in the Social Work department of Quintessential Healthcare Centre in Jos, Nigeria. I decided to place this work with the tradition of Organizational case studies, where the writer writes about their own Organization. This essay has enabled me to get a much more thorough understanding of these particular theories.

All systems must cooperate to deliver the most effective treatment to service users. Social Workers may apply this knowledge in practice by understanding the power relations. In a social service delivery world, where the focus is on outcome measurements and quantitative data, a significant factor can easily be overlooked: service user satisfaction as seen in human connection. Hence, the concept of power is critical in understanding how we work as Social Workers. Power relations indeed are everywhere, and when power is shared, it gives positive regard to service users. Similarly, an environment that condones power conflicts will negatively affect service users. Therefore, the emphasis should be more on creating a service user-enabling environment, given the social work perspectives that support this.

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