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Jerry Tew

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# Understanding Power and Powerlessness

## Towards a Framework for Emancipatory Practice in Social Work

JERRY TEW

*University of Central England, England*

### Abstract

- *Summary:* This paper reviews the existing literature that seeks to conceptualize the operation of power, from modernist ideas of power as a 'thing' that may be possessed, to a range of critical alternatives, including structuralist, Foucauldian and feminist psychological perspectives. This review provides the foundations on which to construct a framework by which social workers may be able to map out and work with issues of power and powerlessness more effectively in their everyday practice.
- *Findings:* Current frameworks, such as anti-oppressive practice, may be insufficient in being able to identify the range and complexity of power relations that may be enacted within a social situation. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding, the article presents a discussion of the application of a framework for analysing the operation of different forms of power – one that acknowledges the potential of power to be both damaging *and* productive.
- *Applications:* Through a discussion of how the concepts within this framework may be applied to a practice scenario, and to issues around the use of power and authority by social workers, there is an exploration of how the framework may provide a useful tool for underpinning emancipatory social work practice.

**Keywords** co-operative power emancipatory practice empowerment oppression power

Over recent years, a defining feature of social work has been a concern with issues of power, particularly in relation to processes of oppression and empowerment (Adams, 1996; Karban and Trotter, 2000). Yet, for something so apparently familiar, there is relatively little consensus as to what power actually

is or how it comes to operate in the ways that it does. Within the sociological literature, power remains a strongly contested concept with 'no agreement about how to define it' (Lukes, 2005: 61). As a consequence, practice can be situated between an array of competing and conflicting definitions. This suggests a need to revisit theoretical understandings, if we are to make sense of the complexities of power and powerlessness as they are experienced by service users and practitioners in their everyday interactions (Proctor, 2002). In particular, it would be helpful to have a more comprehensive framework for the analysis of power relations to underpin emancipatory practice. It is the purpose of this paper to propose such a framework, drawing upon ideas from a variety of sources, including structural theory, feminist psychology and poststructural perspectives.

Lack of clarity around power may be seen to lead to the often woolly and sometimes contradictory usage of the term 'empowerment' in social work and social welfare (Pease, 2002). On the one hand, it may be used to denote mutual support and collective action undertaken by disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Adams, 1996). On the other, it may also be used, in a much more individualized sense, to describe the trajectory of people who manage to rise out of positions of helplessness and confusion to (re)claim control over their lives and discover their own 'inner strengths'. Understandings of empowerment become further complicated by the tendency for empowerment to be *defined for* relatively powerless people by those with vested political or professional interests. For example, the term has been appropriated within neo-liberal (New Right) political discourses in which people are exhorted to 'stand on their own two feet' and throw off the excessive interference of the 'nanny state'. Set against this, there has been an insidious tendency for 'the technologies of empowerment' to be appropriated by practitioners (Anderson, 1996: 111), who may thereby find a way to retain their status as 'experts', and their ability to exert influence over others' lives. Doing 'empowerment' *for* people may involve discourses and practices (for example, in relation to assessment) that are framed in ways that suggest to people what their needs are and what they should aspire to. Thus we have versions of empowerment that are not actually about service users setting their own agendas or taking power for themselves. This links to similar concerns that have been expressed in relation to power implications of being a service user on the receiving end of 'anti-oppressive practice' (Wilson and Beresford, 2000).

## Modernist Understandings of Power as Capability

Much of mainstream social science has avoided the issue of power altogether, particularly in terms of any understanding that might expose more systematic social relations of inequality, discrimination or exclusion (Tew, 2002). Where it has received consideration, there has been a tendency to seek 'an understanding of power as a "thing"' (Westwood, 2002: 1) – a capability that may be

possessed by individuals or society as a whole. From the more individualist perspective of action theory, Max Weber saw power as ‘the capacity of an individual to realize his will, even against the opposition of others’ (1968: 1111). While this notion of *power to* may be seen to fit with a dominant Western masculine vision of individual competition and achievement, it may have less resonance with those who lack privileged access to social and economic resources.

From a societal perspective, Talcott Parsons proposed a countervailing force that could act as the guarantor of social cohesion, moderating and channelling the exercise of individualized *power to*. He identified power as the ‘generalized capacity of a social system to get things done in the interest of collective goals’ (Parsons, 1960: 181). This grounding of power at a societal level may be seen to be achieved by the ‘institutionalization of authority’ (Parsons, 1967: 331), in which it comes to appear natural for power to be vested with those in existing positions of authority, such as statesmen, fathers, industrialists and community leaders – a carry over of the sort of taken-for-granted hierarchies of power that were a feature of more traditional societies.

While both these approaches can make it appear that power is for everyone, they actually underpin definitions of power that effectively keep it as the preserve of those already in more dominant or elite positions within an unequal social order – whether acting in pursuit of individual ends or ensuring the smooth running of civil society. More critical perspectives start to question the reality of any social consensus that could legitimate the holding of power on behalf of society as a whole, and to deconstruct apparently democratic notions of ‘will’ and individualized *power to* as convenient illusions that may mask a more complex underlying reality in which some are more able to exert influence than others. Taking this further, Foucault sought to reject any simplistic idea of people as free and autonomous individuals, who could exercise *power to* on the basis of their conscious and rational intentions. He saw the individual not as the origin or ‘the vis-à-vis of power’, but as ‘one of its prime effects’ (Foucault, 1980: 98). He proposed that power was already ‘out there’ in the patterning of social practices and discourses, acting through, and able to steer, the capacities of individuals to act *as if for themselves*: ‘it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult: in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely’ (Foucault, 1982: 220). Thus, although people may subjectively experience some sense of ‘will’ or direction from within, this may be seen as a will that ‘is never totally controlled by each self’ (Fornas, 1995: 127).

Modernist notions of an individualized potential for *power to*, balanced against a need to regulate this for the benefit of all citizens, may be seen to define much of the legal and organizational basis for the authority that is vested in social workers. However, many service users may feel so disenfranchised from any reality of citizenship that the operation of power may be experienced as very much one-way. Modernist discourses about the balancing of rights and responsibilities (a central part of the rhetoric of New Labour) may fail to

connect with the lives of many people, whose everyday experience of social divisions and social barriers may make them both suspicious of any authority that claims to be acting on the basis of social consensus, and of a vision of empowerment which assumes that they already possess the personal, economic and social resources by which to take power for themselves.

## Structural Approaches to Oppression and 'Power over'

Although postmodernism has tended to bundle together structural analyses of social divisions (such as Marxian or radical feminist approaches) as just another part of the overall modernist project, I think that this is unhelpful when looking at questions of power. Structural approaches take, as their premise, a very different conception of the constitution of the social whole. Instead of atomistic individuals jostling for position and influence within a fair and open social arena, theorists have conceptualized a social formation riven by social divisions (Best, 2005). Certain groups are seen to have privileged access to 'allocative and authoritative resources' (Giddens, 1994), and thereby be in a position to exercise *power over* other groups. In order to maintain such positions of superiority, dominant groups may deploy processes of 'othering' anyone deemed to be different, creating 'them-us' divisions which 'label "others" as inferior and legitimate the exercise of *power over* them' (Dominelli, 2002: 18).

Such structural understandings see power, not as an entity to be possessed (and perhaps redistributed), but as an antagonistic social relation of *oppression*, in which dominant groups are able to derive systematic benefit from their subordination of others through a variety of means, including economic exploitation, cultural imperialism and actual or threatened violence. Typically, those on the receiving end of oppression will 'suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capabilities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings' (Young, 1990: 40). While 'for every oppressed group there is a group that is *privileged* in relation to that group' (Young, 1990: 42), members of the privileged group may not necessarily be aware of any conscious intention to oppress others. Similarly, members of subordinated groups may be only dimly aware of the realities of their oppression – perhaps having just a generalized feeling of frustration or discontent, or tending to blame themselves for their predicament. This suggests that a crucial element of emancipatory practice is to help people to develop a greater understanding of the power relations that may impact on their lives (see Freire, 1970).

It is this body of work that has provided the theoretical underpinnings for many forms of radical or structural approaches to social work (Langan and Lee, 1989; Davis, 1991; Mullaly, 1993), and for the development of anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice (Thompson, 2001; Dominelli, 2002). Such approaches have been critical of the ways in which social work may be situated as part of a state apparatus geared to exercising control over those

potentially rebellious and unruly sections of society that may be particularly angered by their lived experience of social injustice.

It is also suggested that structural relations of social oppression may be internalized, becoming embedded in the organization of people's identities and in their immediate personal relationships (Lipsky, 1987). People may take on the attributions of inferiority that are imposed onto them by dominant groups, lacking sufficient support or social resources with which to contest these. They may learn to lower their aspirations in line with their position within the structuring of society. For some, the impact of more extreme forms of oppression, such as sexual abuse, may become represented in forms of mental distress (Proctor, 2002; Plumb, 2005; Tew, 2005). Such perspectives may potentially link with psychological theory, in terms of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1974), and with psychoanalysis, in terms of how the trauma of abuse may be turned inwards, leaving a residue of shame and self-blame.

Many expositions of structural theory have tended to focus more on the repressive and coercive deployment of power, leading to a 'negative view of power as diminishing action, ideas, movement and the development of the social' (Westwood, 2002: 26). Although in some ways reflecting the realities of power as experienced by many people, this emphasis has come to be criticized, in turn, for conceptualizing power as 'monolithic, unidirectional and oppressive' (Proctor, 2002: 40). Its focus on the victims of power may result in ways of working which situate the practitioner in the role of having to rescue the hapless and essentially passive subjects of social oppression, through intervening in the wider organizational, economic and institutional bases of power on their behalf – thus paradoxically recreating the very paternalistic relations of *power over* between practitioner and service user which radical workers have sought to overturn.

Furthermore, because of tendencies to focus only on simple binaries of oppression (such as race or gender), structural understandings of *power over* have sometimes come to appear less relevant to a social world in which people have come to understand themselves in terms of more fluid identities and more subtle patterns of diversity (Harlow and Hearn, 1996; Healy, 2000). Following Foucault (1981), there has been a tendency to reject, or at least be cautious of, a top-down determinism which suggests that the specifics of power relations operating at a local scale could somehow be read off from an analysis of structural power relations at the scale of society as a whole.

Although denied full access to the privileged (if perhaps illusory) world of individualized *power to*, those subjected to *power over* may nevertheless find ways of accessing productive forms of power for themselves and others. People who lack power may become adept at resisting or subverting the expectations that may be made of them, or the identities that they may be expected to perform – often in subtle and even unconscious ways (Butler, 1993, 1997). Within the context of social work, such manoeuvres by service users, sometimes seen as being 'difficult' or 'manipulative', may nevertheless have come to

represent some people's most realistic strategies for having any influence on their situation – an approach which may not be easy to change quickly, even if they are offered alternative ways of having influence through partnership working.

## Power with and for Others

In contrast to an individualized model of *power to*, a more effective strategy for bringing about opportunities for change and development may involve forging connections with others and building networks of 'reciprocity and mutuality' (Arendt, 1963: 181). For many people, the mutually supported and co-ordinated exercise of power may have greater potential impact than isolated and competitive instances of *power to*. Such experiences of discovering *power together* may be familiar to many women, working-class people and members of ethnic minority groups, where everyday survival may depend on sharing scarce material resources, offering mutual forms of understanding and emotional support, or organizing to resist the oppressive or exclusionary actions of dominant groups (Baker Miller, 1991).

Developed originally within feminist psychology, conceptualizations of *power together* go beyond more conventional notions of solidarity in seeing that mutuality and alliance do not have to be built on some unitary consciousness or shared identity (Baker Miller, 1991; Crow, 2002). Instead of internal differences having to be suppressed or bracketed out in the interests of the common cause, the effectiveness of *power together* may be greater if it can embrace the energy of mutual challenge and capitalize on the awarenesses to be gained from appreciating multiple viewpoints (Surrey, 1991). Within this perspective, questions of difference need no longer be feared as a potential basis for subordination or exclusion, but may be valued as a resource that can open up new forms of creativity and opportunity. Such *co-operative* power may be more effective both in bringing together broader coalitions against the imposition of *oppressive* power, and in fostering ongoing challenge and development within such alliances.

In practice, achieving *co-operative* power within a society dominated by oppressions and inequalities is no easy task. This is an issue that has arisen within the political organization of the disability movement, where sectional and potentially antagonistic identities have been formed through being categorized by services and able-bodied society on the basis of particular types of impairment, such as sight loss, restricted mobility or learning difficulty. As a result, shared emancipatory aims have sometimes become submerged by destructive internal rivalries between groups. If the movement is to move forward in a way that is inclusive, such differences in experience and identity cannot simply be passed over; they must be valued and debated – and out of these dialogues may come further energies and inspirations. Thus, in order to achieve an effective, inclusive and sustainable disability movement, 'a very

difficult position has to be achieved with regard to the importance of *both* points of commonality and difference' (Barton, 1996: 185–6).

However, there is also the potential for *power together* to be far from emancipatory. Banding together may also be undertaken for more offensive (or defensive) reasons. In order to stay in positions of privileged power, members of dominant groups may collude together in restricting access to their 'exclusive club'. Those lower down hierarchies of *power over* may, in turn, act collectively to exclude those even further down. This may be done overtly, as in secretive organizations such as freemasonry or the Ku Klux Klan, or more covertly, perhaps using subtle cultural signifiers to mark out who is, and is not, 'one of us' – a process that may take place at any scale from the school playground to the macro organization of society.

Even when the overt purpose of an organization is to enable solidarity among those with shared experiences of oppression, more subtle and collusive processes may be at work in demarcating the parameters of a common identity around which such solidarity is to be forged. For example, trade unions traditionally developed around the 'white', somewhat macho working-class image of the 'working man', with potentially exclusionary consequences for women, 'black' people, gay men and others. Similarly, earlier phases of the women's movement have been criticized for crystallizing around white middle-class identities, constructing a collusive wall that left other women feeling ignored and their differences in experience dismissed (Spelman, 1988).

Just as the operation of *power together* may be somewhat 'double-edged', in terms of not only countering but also recreating forms of oppression, so it may be helpful to deconstruct the operation of *power over* in order to explore whether it may necessarily involve oppressive forms of control. Although not always straightforward, there may be scenarios in which people may be seen to use their power or authority in the service of, and ultimately to protect, vulnerable others, such as children or older people (see Baker Miller, 1991). This opens up the possibility that the exercise of *power over* may be seen as something positive in enabling the protection of those who may be vulnerable – an insight that may be seen to be crucial in exploring how the practice of social work can be something more than simply acting as part of a repressive state apparatus.

## Defining Power and Powerlessness

From the discussions so far, we may see how power may operate in more complex, insidious and creative ways than would appear from conventional modernist understandings of power as a *thing* – either as an index of personal capability to influence or impact on others, or as a representation of the benign operation of social control on behalf of a social consensus. More critical understandings of the operation of power suggest that it be understood as a *social relation* rather than a *thing*, a relation between people that may take form at



various scales, from the systematic patterning of the social whole, through the more local structuring of interpersonal interactions, to the construction and organization of personal identities (the internalization of power relations). Rather than get caught in a futile debate between structuralist and post-structuralist positions, it may be helpful to acknowledge the possibility of both the top-down and the bottom-up operation of power: there may be systematic organization of power across particular constructions of social difference, and there may be localized and personal performances of power that can serve to either reinforce or stand against this.

Power may be seen as a dynamic which may both bring about individual or social change (see Baker Miller, 1991), and enforce patterns of self-regulation or domination over others. Often, the operation of power may be a double-edged or contradictory process, oppressive or limiting in some respects and productive or protective in others (see, for example, Foucault, 1981). This suggests a working definition of power as 'a social relation that may open up or close off opportunities for individuals or social groups' (Tew, 2002: 165) – where 'opportunity' may involve anything from accessing resources and social or economic participation, through to developing personal identities and capabilities, expressing needs, thoughts and feelings, and renegotiating relationships (see Young, 1990).

Starting with such a broad-ranging definition of power relations, it may be helpful to construct a conceptual framework whereby to locate different possibilities of power. Drawing on the foregoing discussion, we may distinguish between the 'vertical' operation of *power over* across some form of social division or difference, and the 'horizontal' development of *power together* between people. We may also wish to distinguish whether the operation of power in a particular instance has productive aspects, in terms of the opening up of opportunities, or whether it results in some limitation or closing off of opportunity. Putting these two dimensions of analysis together sets up a conceptual matrix (Figure 1) by which to distinguish different modes of operation of power (Tew, 2002: 166). Each cell in the matrix may be seen to describe a particular way in which power may operate.

Whereas conventional approaches to anti-oppressive practice have tended to situate emancipatory activity as a one-dimensional struggle by (or on behalf of) the oppressed against the forces of domination, this matrix offers a broader picture of how power may be operating in more complex and contradictory ways, not all of which may be perceived as negative or limiting. People may be involved in more than one mode of power relations at the same time: for example, an interpersonal relationship may offer opportunities for co-operative power while simultaneously retaining aspects of oppressive inequality in how it is structured.

The categories defined in the matrix may be helpful in understanding how the operation of different modes of power may interlink. For example, the operation of *oppressive power over* others may often be secured by processes of collusion. Internally, this may take the form of dominant groups banding

|                           | Power over  | Power together   |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Productive modes of power | <b><i>Protective power</i></b><br>Deploying power in order to safeguard vulnerable people and their possibilities for advancement | <b><i>Co-operative power</i></b><br>Collective action, sharing, mutual support and challenge – through valuing commonality <i>and</i> difference |
| Limiting modes of power   | <b><i>Oppressive power</i></b><br>Exploiting differences to enhance own position and resources at the expense of others           | <b><i>Collusive power</i></b><br>Banding together to exclude or suppress ‘otherness’ whether internal or external                                |

Figure 1 **Matrix of power relations**

together and establishing exclusionary identities. As well as keeping outsiders from entering their bastions of privilege, these identities may serve to distance members of these groups from any real awareness of, or potential for empathy with, the pain and distress of members of the social groups whom they may be implicated in oppressing. Externally, collusive processes may involve securing the compliance of other groups or identities, inducing them to be part of a wider ‘us’ – perhaps constructed on the basis of an apparent and shared difference from an inferiorized (and potentially demonized) ‘them’. In this way, many white working-class people have been enlisted as part of the project of colonialization – although themselves subject to exploitation and oppression by economically dominant white groups, they have nevertheless bought into a collusive Western ‘white’ identity that set them apart from, and above, all those who were marked out as non-‘white’.

Over time, one mode of power may, perhaps imperceptibly, shift into another. For example, co-operative endeavours may lose sight of their emancipatory purpose and degenerate into a cosy club that serves to block out both potential recruits and awareness of injustice or distress (whether internal or external). The matrix may be helpful in clarifying the overlapping dynamics of *co-operative* and *collusive* forms of power within the organization of social movements and support groups.

Similarly, deployments of *protective power* may easily slide into ones which are perceived as oppressive and disempowering by the recipients. Those in power may use their positions to enforce their agenda (however subtly) on those who may be vulnerable. Alongside this, any tendency to rescue rather than to work in partnership may stifle or further undermine the abilities of those who may already find it hard to mobilize power on their own behalf – and thereby serve to perpetuate, rather than combat, their experience of

powerlessness. Such dynamics may frequently be encountered in relation to how social work interventions are received. Using the matrix may help identify more clearly what is going on, and guard against well-intentioned actions having damaging consequences.

Before embarking on strategies in support of emancipation, it may be important to acknowledge the degree to which groups and individuals may have come to experience powerlessness, often in quite extreme forms. This may equate with feeling stuck, helpless or victimized – and may relate to both current circumstances and histories of subjection within hopelessly unequal social relationships. Such issues came to the surface in research with black mental health service users conducted by the Sainsbury Centre (2002). While participants in focus groups were readily able to identify issues which resulted in their alienation from mainstream services, they fell silent and uncomprehending when asked by black members of the research team how, if they had the choice, they would like to change the way that services were delivered. This would seem to reflect their ongoing subjection within a psychiatric system which had rendered them powerless, with no sense that they could influence the care or treatment they received, due to systematic experiences of discrimination, disproportionate coercion and abusive treatment (Keating, 2003).

Conventional understandings of power as ‘a commodity that can be acquired’ (Fitzsimons and Fuller, 2002: 487) may lead to a very restricted and one-dimensional vision in terms of options for change. Conceptualized within the terms of a ‘zero-sum’ game, any empowerment of those currently experiencing powerlessness may be seen as necessarily involving an equal and opposite disempowerment for ‘those who already hold power’ (Barnes and Bowl, 2001: 19). If the ‘haves’ would have nothing to gain and everything to lose by any move from their current positions, any progress would require a very bruising form of head-on confrontation with limited likelihood of long-term success.

Using the matrix, it may be possible to generate more lateral strategies for dealing with situations of powerlessness, rather than such a head-on approach of directly contesting *oppressive power*. Instead of staying within the confines of a ‘zero-sum’ game, more effective strategies may hinge on bringing about a diagonal shift from *oppressive* to *co-operative* modes of power. Instead of banging one’s head against the same ‘brick wall’, one looks for other ‘doors’ by which to bring about emancipatory change. This may involve engaging in potentially difficult but rewarding processes of dialogue *across* differences, as in the practice of ‘transversal politics’, in which those experiencing oppression seek to negotiate a new space in which to make contact with members of dominant groups (Patel, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1999). Coming out of their respective ‘bunkers’ may offer new possibilities of power, not just for those currently located as members of subordinated groups, but also for those who are isolated by their conventional recourse to forms of *oppressive power*. Invitations to co-operate and work alongside may potentially allow shifts from entrenched

identities (such as 'expert' or 'victim'), and start to undermine social constructions of 'us' and 'them' – thereby opening up opportunities for all participants to enter into 'an active self-transformational process' (Fitzsimons and Fuller, 2002: 487).

## Applying the Matrix to Social Work Practice: Power Relations and Domestic Violence

Let us consider applying the matrix to a scenario of a social worker becoming involved with a family in which a woman is currently subjected to domestic violence by her male partner. In the first instance, the family scenario may be seen to be structured by an exercise of *oppressive power* – a reiteration of pre-existing inequalities in gender relationships, underpinned by differentials in access to social, economic and cultural sources of power, both structural and local. These power relationships may be so embedded within the woman's social and cultural context that she may have access to very few effective strategies for resisting or contesting this pattern of behaviour – perhaps fearing that she would bring shame on herself, her family and, possibly, also her community were she to bring the matter out into the open.

The impact of the *oppressive power* may have resulted in the woman internalizing some elements of her experience – perhaps leading to a profound sense of helplessness and hopelessness, which may be compounded by a tendency towards turning her anger and frustration inwards and blaming herself. In turn, this could contribute to depression or other forms of mental distress. It could also affect her ability to exercise effective *protective power* with regard to her children – resulting in potential concerns with regard to their welfare. From the perspective of the children, if they witness the violence and are unable to stop it, they may also experience this as a failure to exercise *protective power*, and may internalize this as a sense of somehow having colluded in their mother's abuse – an unresolved experience of power and powerlessness that may perhaps be re-enacted in some form later on in subsequent relationships.

The continuance of domestic violence may typically be underpinned by patterns of *collusive power*. Individually and collectively, men may distance themselves from taking responsibility for their behaviour, and its impact on their victims, through the use of rationalizations and justifications such as 'she drove me to it' or 'men have to show that they are in charge' – which may become embedded as 'common sense' understandings that are never challenged. In parallel with this, professional agencies may also act collusively – perhaps not seeing domestic violence as a priority, or as an issue that may require decisive external intervention. Although, in recent years, statutory agencies have made considerable progress in taking the issue seriously, some collusive elements may remain (Mullender and Hague, 2001). For example, women may be defined as potentially unreliable witnesses whose testimony will

not stand up in court. Sometimes women still report that their experiences may be seen as trivial, or that they are simply not believed. Social work agencies may hide behind the limitations of their statutory remit and ignore domestic violence as an issue in its own right deserving of a service response, and only see it as important in as much as it affects, say, the welfare of a child or the mental health of a woman.

Despite these reservations, one option open to a social worker in this scenario would be to work with the legal system to mobilize sufficient *protective power* to ensure the woman's immediate safety – for example through the use of injunctions or statutory powers in relation to child protection, and perhaps also through the prosecution of the perpetrator. Alongside this, the woman may also wish to access services such as a women's refuge, or seek support from friends or relatives. In turn, such a course of action may generate opportunities for *co-operative power* – perhaps through developing supportive relationships with other women who may or may not themselves be in similar situations. The space in these relationships for challenge as well as caring may be important so as to avoid becoming locked into either the collusive relations of (shared) victimhood, or the equally collusive reciprocal construction of victim and rescuer roles. While such defensive forms of *collusive power* may serve the purpose of eliciting protection by others at a time of vulnerability, they may, if continued in the longer term, trap people into ongoing positions of powerlessness.

What may be particularly important is for the social worker not to become part of such *collusive power* relations by taking on the role of rescuer, but to practise in a way that engages with the woman as an active partner in the work – generating possibilities for *co-operative power* while acknowledging and respecting differences of identity and positional power. Male workers may face particular difficulties either in establishing sufficient commonalities of experience on which to base a co-operative relationship, or in avoiding the trap of becoming the 'knight in shining armour' who will, for evermore, collude in protecting this 'damsel in distress' from other predatory men.

However, in themselves, such mobilizations of *protective* and *co-operative power* may not result in any lasting change in the perpetrator's pattern of behaviour. Recognizing this, there has been an increasing focus on working directly with perpetrators – but usually only in situations where the penal system can give workers *power over* offenders, and can require them to attend sessions designed to challenge and change their attitudes (Mullender and Burton, 2001). However, long-term success rates may not always be very high. If men experience professionals' use of *power over* as itself oppressive, then, whatever the intended message in terms of behavioural change, the medium of intervention may deliver a more potent message of the form 'if you have access to *power over*, then it is OK to use this to impose your way of looking at things onto others'. Such a message may inadvertently connect with, and tend to reinforce, some of the collusive rationalizations that underpin men's use of

violence. Furthermore, men may have little motivation for change as long as they retain the perception that they have a lot to lose and little to gain by abandoning the power gained through their oppressive behaviour towards women – indeed that this may feel like the only form of power that they have.

Being part of a men's group offers potential for both *co-operative* and *collusive power*. A group composed of men who have already started to take responsibility for their violence has the possibility, through mutual support and constructive challenge, to develop potent forms of *co-operative power* (see, for example, Wild, 1999). However, this may be inhibited by pervasive and collusive male cultures in which it can be unacceptable and unsafe for men to show vulnerability in front of other men. A group in which at least a sizeable minority of men have yet to take responsibility for their violence is probably more likely to develop a more collusive ethos. Signals may be transmitted between group members which act to reinforce codes of behaviour that are centred around the competitive deployment of *oppressive power*. Nods, winks and the power messages implicit within overt challenges to the group leaders may be used to reinforce the beliefs and rationalizations about self and others, and about men and women, that serve to underpin their actual or threatened use of violence.

Some of the most innovative approaches to working with perpetrators of domestic violence have been pioneered by feminist practitioners (Orme et al., 2000). In itself, the introduction of the feminine within the working situation may be seen immediately to disrupt some of the potential for *collusive power* between men, a collusion within which male workers can inadvertently become implicated. These approaches also involve moving outside the parameters of the 'zero-sum' view of empowerment in devising strategies of inviting perpetrators into more co-operative forms of working relationship (Cavanagh and Cree, 1996). Instead of seeking to tackle *oppressive power* head on, more effective progress may be made through processes of dialogue that gently but persistently engage with men's internalizations of *collusive power* (in terms of attitudes and beliefs) and the enactment of *collusive power* within group or individual interactions. Such a dialogue opens up the possibility of breaking through the barriers by which men may shield themselves from awareness of the level of hurt, distress and anger that their behaviour may have engendered within their female victims. Ultimately, this may lay the groundwork for men to hear directly the experience of those towards whom they may have used (or threatened) violence – which may be a crucial step towards more permanent changes in attitudes and behaviour.

In seeking to establish working relationships based on co-operative forms of connection, a crucial balance must be maintained between the application of 'relational and connected principles of caring' towards the men and their experience, and holding on to a clarity in relation to questions of social justice (Orme, 2002: 811): a dialogue conducted from a perspective of *caring about* does not 'mean that people are not held responsible for their actions' (Orme,

2002: 806). The desired end-point remains that of encouraging men to take responsibility for their violence – and a strategy based on dialogue and engagement, rather than the imposition of new behavioural rules from a position of *power over*, may be a more effective strategy in the long run: ‘identities and diverse ways of being change as a result of participation’ (Orme, 2002). If, as part of engaging in the work, men start to allow themselves to enter into trusting relationships of caring, support *and* challenge with workers, then they can start to feel for themselves what *co-operative power* might be like, and what it might offer them in terms of new sorts of personal relationships, and opportunities for personal development and change, if they were fully to abandon their use of violence. Thus, instead of men fearing that they have everything to lose by abandoning their use of *oppressive power*, they may come to realize that what they may potentially have to gain, in terms of *co-operative power*, may be far more valuable to them in the long run.

## The Power of the Practitioner

When much that is written about *power over* has tended to focus on its destructive and discriminatory aspects, it can be hard for social workers to have confidence and clarity in the use of power for positive purposes. The radical social work critique suggested that when social workers used their authority they were primarily acting as agents of social control, policing the potential deviance of marginalized social groups on behalf of state organizations that essentially reflected the interests of already privileged sections of society (Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). However, with a more sophisticated analysis, it becomes possible to distinguish how social workers may deploy power and authority in ways that may be productive, as against ways that may be limiting or oppressive – although negotiating this boundary may not always be easy within agencies in which social workers may themselves feel subject to limiting or oppressive forms of organizational *power over*.

In putting into practice the principles of partnership, social workers may be seen as having a mandate to develop relationships of *co-operative power* wherever possible across many forms of social difference – with service users, families, professionals, communities and other agencies. These relationships must recognize the real imbalances of power, authority and access to resources that may exist between the different parties – and there must be explicit permission for such issues to be talked about openly. There would need to be space for support and challenge between users and practitioners – with workers valuing and learning from the ‘standpoint’ knowledges of service users (Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2001), while able to contribute frameworks of understanding and problem resolution based on their professional training. This may be seen to have the potential, not just to increase opportunity and influence for the user, but also to enable the practitioner to be part of a much more potent alliance for change, opening up possibilities for personal and

professional outcomes that might not have been possible through a more conventional structuring of professional *power over*.

Alongside this, social workers also have a mandate to deploy *protective power* on behalf of vulnerable children and adults – and this authority is underpinned by specific legal and other frameworks. While workers' intentions may be to use this power in ways that are enabling and productive for those needing protection, there are continual dangers of using expert knowledge, and legal and organizational status, in order to construct oppressive, excluding or patronizing forms of professional *power over* – and perhaps also entering into collusive relationships with professionals or powerful others who may also be involved in the situation.

It can be all too easy to slip from a position of caring *about* a person who is vulnerable (which does not imply that they have to be 'one-down' in any sense) to one of caring *for* them (which may implicitly construct them as 'inadequate' and needing others to take over the running of their life (Morris, 1998; Ellis, 2000)). The deployment of *protective power* does not imply such a take-over – and can be most effective when it emerges from a co-operative alliance between the worker, the service user and key members of their family or social networks. However, it must be recognized that in certain extreme or emergency situations, the deployment of *protective power* may require the more direct imposition of *power over* by the practitioner, albeit on as temporary a basis as possible. Here again, best practice must be to strive to maintain open, respectful and co-operative relationships with all parties involved, so as to maximize people's potential to take control back for themselves at a later date. Failure to do this would mean that what may be intended as *protective power* becomes experienced as *oppressive power*.

In certain scenarios, social workers may switch from co-operative to protective deployments of power – for example, abandoning an attempt to work alongside a parent to raise standards and deciding to apply to court for the power to protect and meet the needs of the children more effectively. Such a shift may appear confusing to service users – and may potentially feel oppressive if it seems that the worker has abandoned their previous commitment to mutuality and respect, and is suddenly taking over. However, if the earlier relationship had been truly co-operative, embracing both support *and* challenge, then a decision to protect is less likely to come as a shock, and it may be possible to maintain an honest and open dialogue about the need for, and the management of, the arrangements for protection. Problems are more likely to arise where there has also been a perhaps unrecognized element of *collusive power* in the relationship – for example, where social workers may have been so keen to ally themselves with service users that they have failed to confront issues of potential abuse or discrimination. If challenges (either way) have been kept off the agenda, then protective actions may be seen to 'come out of the blue' and feel like an oppressive betrayal of trust. This suggests the need for always being 'upfront' about issues of power and authority within social work



– a stance which may enable service users to feel more able to trust and enter into working relationships of partnership.

In turn, social workers' abilities to deploy power in positive ways may be influenced by the culture and power relations of the organizations in which they work. Rather than there being a 'zero-sum' trade-off that suggests that, in a generalized way, practitioners need to be dispossessed of some of their power in order that users may be 'empowered', there is strong evidence that workers who are part of more participatory and supportive organizations may, in turn, be more effective in enabling the emancipation of service users. More specifically, workers already familiar with a '*co-operative power*' culture of mutual support and challenge would tend to be more confident in replicating this in establishing working alliances with service users, and their approach to using *protective power* (for example, in undertaking risk assessments) is likely to be more inclusive and less authoritarian. Conversely, those practising in oppressive or collusive working environments may be poorly disposed towards working in collaborative ways, and may be more insensitive and 'heavy handed' in their use of *protective power* in relation to those who may be vulnerable.

## Conclusions

Making use of the matrix, it becomes possible to derive a broader context for emancipatory practice, rather than a more one-dimensional vision of struggle against, and resistance to, the imposition of oppressive power. It provides a relatively straightforward and practical tool for mapping the potentially complex and overlapping forms of power relations that may be operating in a given social situation. This may offer a perspective in relation to assessments and interventions that can provide a clearer basis for understanding and working with questions of need and risk – one that does not have an inherent tendency to put down the service user and define them as someone who is essentially inadequate, needy or dangerous. A multi-dimensional approach ensures that the realities of both structural and individual oppression are not forgotten, while, at the same time, offering the possibility of more lateral thinking in identifying potential directions for the productive organization and deployment of power.

Shifting from more limiting to more productive modes of power raises the possibility of new ways of 'being with' social difference. Instead of reiterating social relations that construct difference as an excuse for deploying *oppressive* or *collusive power*, we may become more used to relating to difference within relations of *co-operative* or *protective power* – where it may be valued and nurtured, and act as a resource for dialogue and constructive challenge. This may be seen to link with Peter Leonard's vision (1997) of welfare activity based on principles of solidarity without sameness.

However, any moves to change the operation of power can only take place

within already existing contexts of social relations. It may therefore be necessary to work creatively (and sometimes subversively) from existing identities in order to change the way that social differences are constructed, and power relations are organized around those differences – suggesting incremental rather than revolutionary processes of change.

As long as social work is tied to paradigms, useful though they are, such as anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice, emancipatory practice tends to be seen as working towards an end-state that may only be defined, somewhat negatively, as the absence of oppression or inequality. 'Empowerment' offers a more positive vision of the productive possibilities of power but, as was discussed earlier, this concept can be too imprecise and capable of misuse to be of great practical value. However, if a multi-dimensional understanding of power is utilized, emancipatory practice may be seen as a more complex process with no easily defined end-state. It is a direction of travel which, at different times, may involve resisting oppressive or collusive modes of power, and exploring new possibilities for constructing or harnessing productive modes of power together with, and on behalf of, others.

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JERRY TEW is Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Central England and has previous experience as an approved social worker, manager and training officer. He is research lead for the Social Perspectives Network for Modern Mental Health and is the subject adviser for social work for the Mental Health in Higher Education Project. His research interests have included theories of power, social models of mental distress, service user involvement and the impact of compulsion on mental health service users. Recent publications and research reports include: 'Valuing Experience: Users' Experience of Compulsion under the Mental Health Act 1983', *Mental Health Review* 5(3): 11–14 (2000); and 'Going Social: Championing a Holistic Model of Mental Distress within Professional Education', *Social Work Education* 21(2): 143–56 (2002). Address: School of Social Work, University of Central England, Perry Barr, Birmingham B42 2SU, UK. [email: jerry.tew@uce.ac.uk]