

## 4. Power, discourse and resistance

### Overview

Although the term 'power' is in common usage and applied in a variety of contexts, in social and political theory it is a contested concept. There are essentially two ways of conceptualising power, as power-over and power-to (Dyson, 2007). To understand the ways in which individuals position themselves and how they are influenced by external factors it is necessary to understand power. Structuralists like Marx theorised power as dominating, whereas post-structuralists, following Foucault, have theorised power as neither positive or negative, but circulating in networks. Here we will examine these two theories about the operation and effects of power, particularly as it operates in health and community care settings.

### Objectives

By the end of this topic you will have:

- Reviewed Foucault's theories about discourse, power, governmentality, surveillance and biomedicine.
- Practiced identifying dominant and subjugated discourses as they relate to sexuality and ageing
- Reflected on some ways in which individuals resist dominant discourses
- Considered the implications of this topic for your own practice.

### Key Concepts

Models of power; Biomedicine; Governmentality; Resistance; Discourse; Discursive formations

### Required reading

Foucault, M. (1982). The Subject and Power. *Critical Enquiry*, 8, 777-794.

Powell, J & Biggs, S (2003). *Foucauldian Gerontology: a methodology for understanding aging*, *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, 14, September.

### Further reading

Allen, A. (1999). Chapter 1. Introduction in *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press:.

### Lecture Notes

#### **Structuralist models of power**

A Marxist model of power is characterised by three main features: that power is possessed, that it flows from above to below from a centralised source, and that it is primarily repressive (Sawicki, 1991, p. 20 - 21). This is sometimes called juridical (or legal or administrative)

power. In other words, the power of the state, or the law. Within juridical models of power those who possess power oppress those who are powerless. Structuralists, following Marx, propose that meta-narratives, or grand, encompassing accounts, can provide a framework that creates a kind of universal order for an individual or group's experience. Meta-narratives are generally characterised by some kind of transcendent and universal truth (Stephens & McCallum, 1998).

Within the juridical meta-narrative, the only option for the oppressed is to overthrow the oppressor; strategies for change range from revolutionary to evolutionary. Regardless of the strategy, power is seen as a possession, to be won and redistributed.

### ***Post structuralist models of power***

Foucault developed his theories about power through the study of a number of social institutions, including psychiatry, medicine, the human sciences, and the prison system. He also undertook ground breaking work on human sexuality. Foucault's work on power, and the relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse, have been widely applied in the social sciences and are gaining increasing popularity in human services.

Rather than seeing power as a simple hierarchical concept, Foucault constituted it as a force that could be either a positive or negative, repressive or productive. Within this formulation, power operates locally, circulates in institutions, and emanates from every point in the social field. Furthermore, where there is power, there is inevitably resistance. This creates space for individuals to contest power within a more or less open field of possibilities.

Foucault did not deny the potential for power to be used oppressively, however he did argue that individuals always have agency – the capacity to act of their own volition – and as such, they possess power. In this formulation, the options for resistance and change are multiple, and often occur in micro-sites.

### ***Foucault and power***

Foucault's early investigations into forms of power took place in prisons and asylums for the mentally ill. He identified four types or 'technologies', within which human behaviour can be understood:

1. Production – the capacity to 'produce, transform, or manipulate things'
2. Sign systems – the capacity to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification to communicate
3. Power – which determines the conduct of individuals
4. Care of the self – by which we seek happiness, wisdom etc. (care of the self will be discussed in more detail in lecture 6)

He argued that these technologies were not independent of each other, but interact to 'modify' individuals as they acquire skills and attitudes. The ways in which individuals interact with others and manage themselves Foucault called 'governmentality'. In other words, the ways in which we modify our own behaviour – through self monitoring and self regulation – as a result of the normalising effects of power, greatly reduces the need for the external imposition of power to modify our actions.

Later in his work, Foucault became interested in the ways in which power played out in the 'clinic', or the early stages of what has become known as hospital, or Western medicine. It was in the clinic that the individual body was able to be subjected to unprecedented levels of intense observation, (the clinical gaze). This capacity to observe the individual produced a new power relationship between the doctor and patient which, according to Foucault (1973), operated by making the body of the patient visible and known to the doctor.

Rose (1990) expanded on Foucault's construction of biomedicine as the clinic, to include the whole range of 'therapeutic authorities', such as doctors, psychologists and other health care providers. In this framework, the discursive effects of the biomedical 'apparatus' contribute to the construction of individual subjects. In other words, we embody the discursive manifestations of biomedicine. Accordingly, rather than individual beliefs and behaviours in relation to health and well-being resulting from innate psychological characteristics, they are a result of the embodiment of biomedicine's discursive authority.

This is not a simple matter of external imposition. As a result of the productivity of self formation, regulation emerges from inside ourselves, from our desire for happiness and our striving for fulfilment (Rose, 1990). Regulation is not practised via domination and control, but through the promotion and installation of autonomous self-hood. The regulatory ideal of the self calls for profound inwardness and concomitant personal autonomy. Thus, in Foucault's formulation, governmentality replaced juridical power in the management of the populace, other than in its narrow functions identified above.

### ***Discourse and Discursive Formations***

Foucault saw discourse as consisting of more than linguistic meaning; for him discourse was material, located in institutions and practices which define difference, and shape the material world. Meaning is produced within a range of institutionally located discourses which operate to shape social relations that are culturally produced, plural, and ever changing.

Discursive formations are different from ordinary discourses in that they are located within institutions that regulate or control individuals. For Foucault discursive formations reside in the disciplines, and interact with social structures in different ways, to bring about the transformation of objects. The key to understanding the disciplines as discursive formations is to see them as structures that have clear rules and regulations, which are not fixed, but establish limits and exclusions in line with contemporary views. They are affected by the constraints of institutional power and control within social structures and also determine and limit what is legitimate to say or write, as well as what counts as evidence. They are autonomous and anonymous, being part of an ontological discursive regularity, and go through transformations and 'radical discontinuities' at times (although these are never complete). Furthermore, these structures constitute forms of power that shape subjects and assist in regulating social life through the process of normalisation (Olssen, 1999, p. 23). Within the fields constituted by discursive formations, such as biomedicine, dominant discourses are produced by power/knowledge. However, the individual subject's subjugated knowledges constitutes another field in which subversive discourses are produced. The result of these interactions is not pre-determined, however, because of the individual's capacity to resist.

**Reflection**

Over a period of 5 days, look at images of older people in the media; magazines, newspapers, television, movies, advertising etc. Observe what you see in your day to day activities, but consciously think about the messages being conveyed in what you see.

**Journal work:** Keep notes about the messages and stereotypes you observe during this period, and what they convey about older people. At the end of the week, review your notes and ideas, and identify the dominant discourses you have observed. Reflect on these discourses and identify some of the ways that people resist dominant discourses about ageing.