DILEMMAS ABOUT CONCEPT OF POWER IN SYSTEMIC THINKING

Maja Rus-Makovec

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ABSTRACT

From the foundational ideas of Gregory Bateson through to more recent debates in the 1980s, the question, how the power can or should be understood in systemic thinking has been controversial. In the actual article the possibility of circular and non linear view of power are discussed. The idea, that notion of power being potentially unethical and toxic in its effects is discussed regarding the idea of hierarchy and therapists' position of power. Clinical examples are also presented.

POVZETEK

Odgovori na vprašanje, kakšna sta vloga in pomen moči v t.i. sistemskem mišljenju so še vedno kontroverzni, kar velja za celotno časovno obdobje od Gregoryja Batesona, ki je začetnik tovrstnih konceptov, pa do današnjih dni. V pričujočem članku se načenja vprašanje v zvezi s krožnim (cirkularnim) in nelinearnim pojmom socialne moči. Zlasti se obravnava odnos med neetičnostjo in možnimi negativnimi vplivi učinkov socialnega vplivanja na eni ter terapevtovim položajem v hierarhiji skupinske moči na drugi strani. Omenjeni so tudi nekateri klinični primeri.

IZVLEČEK

Gregory Bateson je prvi vnesel pojem moči v sistemski način razmišljanja. Bateson je koncept moči videl kot epistemološko napako - unilateralna moč naj ne bi bila mogoča, saj ljudje soustvarjamo odnose, v katere smo vpeti. Nadalje je videl moč kot potencialno neetično in škodljivo v svojih učinkih. Omenjeni avtor je eden od začetnikov sistemskega pogleda na svet ; zanimivo je, da dolga leta njegova razmišljanja niso bila deležna kritičnega pretresa. V literaturi, ki se ukvarja z družinsko terapijo, so začeli bolj sistematično obravnavati koncept moči šele v 80-etih. Praktično delo na področju otroške zlorabe in na področju nasilja za domačimi vrati ga je osvetlilona drug način . V takih primerih so ocenili cirkularnost in komplementarnost v razmerju žrtve in tistega, ki je zlorabil svojo moč, kot neetično. Vpeljan je bil nov izraz, ki osvetljuje koncept moči, in sicer "ne - linealno". Izraz pomeni, da žrtev ali šibkejši subjekt v odnosih sicer lahko s svojim vedenjem do določene mere vpliva na močnejšega, toda ne enakopravno. V prispevku avtorica razpravlja tudi o terapetovi poziciji moči in o manifestaciji moči v hierarhiji. Dileme o konceptu moči ilustrira s kliničnimi primeri.

INTRODUCTION

Once when I have been trying to explain to my patients in couple therapy their relationship as mutual, circular, wife accused me to be cynical. From the circular standpoint their relationship was mutual, circular, but only her nose was broken.

This essay resulted from my dilemmas about concept of power in systemic thinking: -how to understand and how to deal with it without lineal thinking and without being unfair to the individual.

GREGORY BATESON ABOUT POWER

From the foundational ideas of Gregory Bateson through to more recent debates of the 1980s, the question of how power can or should be understood in systemic thinking has been controversial. The problem of theorizing about power in family therapy needs to be contextualized first in terms of the influence of Bateson's foundational work (Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993). D. Luepnitz wrote down that she hasn't found no name cited more often in fifty family therapy texts than that of Gregory Bateson(Luepnitz, 1988). Bateson's amalgam of cybernetics and general systems theory, alloyed with a measure of Russellian logic and post-Kantian constructivism became the hard currency of family systems discourse. As Luepnitz said, it was unusual for the intellectual mentor of a discipline to be the target of so little criticism(Luepnitz, 1988). In the decade since Bateson's death, family therapist have not endeavored to challenge his cybernetic or general systems thinking but instead have simply elaborated on his views . So also his contentious understanding of power has been crucial in the way in which family therapy has engaged with the discussion of power. The influence of his ideas can be seen in the respect and acceptance given to his position on power and equally important, it can be seen in the way oppositional positions have developed with central reference to his ideas. Thus at critical points in the history of the debate within family therapy, Bateson's voice on the subject of power has remained pivotal.

Despite the influence of Bateson's ideas about power, he in fact wrote comparatively little on the subject. He rarely elaborated on his difficulties with the idea of power. While this may be seem paradoxical, it makes sense when Bateson's position is examined. His ideas about power are on two

themes. The first theme is that the concept of power is an epistemological error, that one individual can't hold unilateral power over another , because people are always subjects to the constraints of being part of relationship. Power become defined as a lineal concept that failed to grasp the systemic nature of the world (Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993).

Bateson illustrated his claim that unilateral power did not exist with example of Goebbels and with his relationship to German masses. Bateson argued that while Goebbels might have appeared to be the man in power, he nonetheless was dependent on the people for feedback on how better to indoctrinate them. Thus in system terms, while Goebbels controlled the people, they also controlled him(Luepnitz, 1988, Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993).

Also many feminist take a moral position on power similar to that of Bateson (later in the text, feminist which have different standpoint will be mentioned). That is many of us would prefer that human beings think much more in terms of dialogue, collaboration and reciprocity than in terms of achieving control over others. Feminist scholar Marilyn French emphasized these "systemic" values in her critique of patriarchal cultures. The hope that a transformation in social values will come about must not prevent us from recognizing that it has not happened yet and that we ignore the reality of power at our peril. Returning to the case of Goebbels, it is true that an individual among the German masses might express an opinion that could end up influencing Goebbels. But the difference made by that difference of opinion depends not on individual but on Goebbels. Individual can be eliminated; no single person can have an equal impact on Goebbels. The masses may rise up against the man in power, but the fact that collective action is required further reveals the power difference(Luepnitz, 1988).

The second and connected theme is Bateson's idea that punctuation of the world, using the notion of power, is potentially unethical and toxic in its effects.. It is clear that the theoretical and political position expressed in these two themes not only precludes further theorizing about power, but in fact actively censors the concept of power. Hence there is an absence in Bateson's own work of any further consideration of power and its effects.

CHALLENGES TO THE BATESONIAN CONCEPT OF POWER

In terms of the influence within family therapy of Bateson's position on power, it is important to note that his censorship of power was repeated initially in the way in which family therapy failed to engage with the subject of power. Indeed, it is only since the early 1980s that power has been given any serious theoretical or political attention within the literature of family therapy. The absence of family therapy's attention to power is of course in sharp contrast to the importance of power as an idea in the wider academic and political milieu of the 1960s and 1970s(Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993).

Having noted the influence of Bateson's ideas on the way in which family therapy failed to engage with the subject of power, the next step is to examine the influence his ideas have had in structuring subsequent debates and discussions. Bateson's two themes of the impossibility of unilateral power and the toxicity of the very notion of power become central here. It was the first idea of the impossibility of unilateral power that became the focus of series of articles in the mid-1980s, which then raised debate about power in family therapy. Challenges were made to the Batesonian equation - the equation beginning with a commitment to understanding relationship in terms of circularity and complementarity, leading to the impossibility of unilateral power, and this in turn leading to a negation of power in the theory and practice of family therapy. In one of the earlier articles in this series , Goldner(1)expresses the concern that would continue to be raised:

"...how are we to explain the complacent brand of moral relativism that allows family therapists to pervert the concept of circularity by confusing an elegant truth, that master and slave are psychologically interdependent, with the moral repugnant and absurd notion that the two are therefore equals¿"

It is true that the less powerful can almost always influence the more powerful, but the difference between influence and legitimate power is not trivial. Children, for example, can influence parents by trying out new behaviors, but it is not in a child's power ultimately to define his or her actions as good, or rebellious or sick. Parents and professionals will do that. In seeking a more precise definition of power we might call it the ability to categorize or define things. Or as Nietzsche said, it is the power to name things.

Not surprisingly feminists writing and working in the field of child abuse and domestic violence were particularly struck by the grave difficulties of working

in fields where the abusive effects of power were all too obvious, and yet finding in family therapy no real acknowledgment of power, and a therapeutic framework that gave little help in working with its abusive effects.. Writing from a position supportive to the new epistemology, Dell pointed out the paucity of language within the cybernetic frame to describe the individual's (lineal) experience of violence. His concern was that the use of circularity to describe events could invalidate an individual's experience and that circularity needed to be restricted in its use to explanation rather than description (Luepnitz, 1988, Smith, 1994).

Family therapists, following Bateson, have tried to do without a concept of power and so have maintained the idea that a complementary system should never be described in terms of the relative power of its constituents. This has led to some nefarious ideas that men who beat their wives are in a complementary dance with them. The complementary dance theory is said to afford therapeutic leverage, but as a theory it misses the point that the social institutions of naming(psychiatry and the law) privilege the male partner. Many therapists can resist the idea of power because it implies to them that women are innocent victims of men, or that the female self is free from the violence of desire. Women, of course, are not morally superior to men. A "non-lineal" statement of this power problem might be expressed as follows: Women do participate in their own abuse, but not as equals(Goldner, 1991, Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993).

I'm working a great deal in the field of addiction (mostly alcohol dependency), so I'm interested a lot in issues of power and of dependency. The primary characteristics of an addictive process is that the attempt to have power or control over some aspects of oneself through the use of some external agent ultimately renders a person powerless and dependent (Bepko, 1994). Since this statement could be viewed as a description of the dynamics that occur at many levels in male-female interaction within a patriarchal culture, the addictive process offers particular clarity as a lens for viewing some of the gender issues currently of concern to family therapists. The inequity of power is always a problem in addictive families, on many different levels. It is well known that drinking is greater social stigma for women and on the other hand that women are frequently blamed for causing men's addiction or are blamed for their responses to male addiction.

Zf and ZM came in family therapy because husband was alcoholic. Three years ago he lost his job (because of the economic crises; his drinking wasn't obvious but in the family). They mixed their roles -the husband became a perfect

housekeeper and the wife started to improve and to develop her career. He said that now he was powerless, but the wife became very powerful - she was the only one who earned money. He also said that she is powerless only over his drinking. She agreed with him. She in fact enjoyed her new position, the only problem in the family was from her standpoint his drinking. The children said that the father was much better housekeeper than mother and that positions at home shouldn't be changed. In fact everybody except father/husband was satisfied with power redistribution in the family. I think that the issue of power was offered to me "on the plate", but that I missed the opportunity to discuss it with the family because of my countertranssference problem(f.e.discussing how the man feels in this position, is it allowed for the woman to live in this way or she can feel guilty, how the hierarchy is changed in the family, how is this family perceived in larger system because the gender roles are mixed, how the alcohol is used to balance the power etc.). In the time of this family therapy me and my husband were buying a new flat and I had more opportunity to earn money and I also had greater salary. I think that wasn't easy for my husband, even we proclaim ourselves as having the same rights and I was ambivalent to my position. But , as it will be mentioned later again, it can be harmful not to mention power. With "not discussed power redistribution and all following effects new spaces weren't open for this family.

More recently, a shift in emphasis from the new epistemology to constructivism has seen a marginalization of the idea of homeostasis on which the concepts of circularity and complementarity rely. The newer emphasis is on narrative, the idea of the therapeutic conversation and the role of cultural meanings and beliefs that underpin the process of change and intervention. Within this new interpretation of the systemic tradition closed systems and circularity are no longer the central concepts to be used in understanding family relationship; hence the theme of the impossibility of unilateral power is no longer at the forefront(Flaskas, Humphreys, 1993, Towns, 1994).

THERAPISTS' POSITION OF POWER

A change could be expected in the way in which power is now being discussed. The literature is now centering more on Bateson's second theme, that is the question of whether power is toxic notion. This theme appears in discussions of the therapists' position of power. There are also dilemmas about the therapists' ability to influence patient change and about hierarchical position of the therapists in relation to the patient - which then links to the

constructivist idea of the therapeutic conversation. Ways of minimizing the expert and more powerful position of the therapist are addressed in several articles by Hoffman, Atkinson and Heath, Anderson and Goolishian (Simon, 1993). Inherent in this kind of discussions is a discomfort with the therapist's position of power and a concern for the potentially destructive influence this may create in the therapist-patient relationship. The articles from constructivists frame elaborate the continuing concern about the idea of power and its potential toxicity in therapy. Minuchin has recently critiqued this work, arguing that there is a lack of engagement with the full realities of power in clients' lives. He points not only to the implications of power for the client-therapist relation, but also to the effects on families in terms of poverty, health and racism (Simon, 1993).

In contrast to the constructivist articles a second strand of work is emerging that focuses on the role and ethics of the therapists. Willbach and McGregor argue that the effect of therapists' neutrality when working with abuse may lead to the person who have experienced the abuse further blaming and may add to the tendency of those who abuse others to further deny The effect of not naming "power" (and its abuse) is more toxic in its effects on patients than the potential harmfulness of naming power (Luepnitz, 1988, Simon, 1993 Smith, 1994).

HIERARCHY AS POWER

It is Haley and Minuchin who are most responsible for having made the concept of hierarchy a central one in family therapy theory (Simon, 1993). Both of them think of hierarchy in terms of power. Haley defines hierarchy as levels of status and power, while Minuchin describes hierarchy as different levels of authority. Haley and Minuchin see a generational hierarchy as normative in families and also prescribe a hierarchical relationship between therapist and family in order for therapy to be effective.

It is their equation of hierarchy with power that has rendered the image of the hierarchical therapist a fit subject for constructionist critiques. Details of critique have varied as a function of the theoretical perspective of the particular critic. Devotees of Bateson -more properly called second-order cybernetician than constructionists - have decried the way in which the image of the hierarchical therapist perpetuates the epistemological error entailed by belief in the "myth of power". Admirers of Maturana and Varela have pointed to the impossibility of " instructive interaction" to justify their rejection of

hierarchy in therapy. Finally, proponents of a post modernist, language-based view of human functioning (who are constructionists properly so-called) have noted the likelihood that the therapist who operates from a hierarchical position will short circuit the process of dialogue by which meaning is co-created in therapy. Since it is precisely the process of dialogue that is therapeutic, the hierarchical therapist - from this perspective - is frequently no therapist at all. Getting family members to talk over their problems among themselves in order to confront and to resolve their problems their differences is a valuable and neglected tool in family therapy(Simon, 1993, Towns, 1994). The therapist who gets the family talking avoids the pitfall of becoming too central, too intrusive, too controlling. Therapists teach not by telling people how to run their lives, but by helping them to learn something about themselves.

Informing all of these theoretical critiques of the hierarchical therapist is the sound clinical perception that " power idea...can be set up a backlash. A too purposeful insistence on what clients should do or how a change should be engineered sometimes acts against the influence that a therapist would like to have. "(Simon, 1993) The journey from the resulting clinical impasse to the therapist's invocation of the notion of resistance and of a variety of other pathologizing concepts is all too often an unfortunately brief one.

Fivaz-Depeursinge described a conception of hierarchy that differs from the concept discussed above. Nowhere in Fivaz-Depeursinge's description is there to be found the equation of hierarchy with power, which has rendered the image of the hierarchical therapist objectionable to constructionist critics. Replacing power at the heart of Fivaz-Depeursinge's conception are the notions of time and development(Simon, 1993).

In Fivaz-Depeursinge's rendering hierarchy is not conceived as levels of status, power or authority, but as levels of temporality. Specifically, the model "explicitly defines the positions of levels within a system according to their time constants (that is the typical duration of a level's episodes in relation to others). The longer a level's constant, the higher the level is placed in the hierarchy; the briefer a level's time constant , the lower it is placed". As a result of the difference in time constants, events at any given level in a hierarchy can variously be said to be embed, contextualize, or frame events at the next lower level, while events at the lower level can be said to be nested within events at the higher level.

Developmental component is central to Fivaz-Depeursinge's definition of hierarchy. As she defines it, hierarchy always implies development. Whereas for Haley and Minuchin it is natural to use the phrase "power hierarchy", for Fivaz-Depeursinge the phrase that is most apt is "framing-developing hierarchy".

On the other hand, power is a problem for family therapy because power is a problem. As Virginia Goldner wrote down:" ...isn't attempt to lift the fact of power out of construct of hierarchy, finally, just such an extended form of sophistry. To create a theoretical New-speak without a category of therapeutic power begs the moral and political questions that power asks. These include, for example, how do some people come to take, and others to cede power? How can power relations be changed? How does the therapeutic situation illuminate or obscure arrangements of power (including those between therapist and clients)?" She emphasized, that Fivaz-Depeursinge hasn't equated hierarchy with power indeed, but she has been talking about critical importance of the issue of equality versus inequality(Goldner, 1993).

The therapist has "a power to have ability of holding", like a parent. The therapist is always holding the situation of treatment, while simultaneously acting within in. The therapist is supposed to be able of containing such things as painful ideas or affects, holding contradictions together without splitting ideas or people into good or bad, holding onto a understanding of people's motives and actions and holding onto hope, to a sense of possibility and to belief in change. And this is a "positive power".

Anderson and Goolishian noted that the therapist is a master conversational artist(Goldner, 1993). But family treatment involves also consultation to a social group, whose ideas and feelings about one another have material social consequences. That's why it is maybe better to use the term dialogue instead conversation, because it conveys a sense of serious purpose. But even "dialogue" doesn't quite convey the social complexity or the social consequences of therapy talk.

Hierarchy evokes echoes of all we feel about authority: less-than-ideal parents, mean teachers, bossy bosses, spouses who try to tell us what to do. But on the other hand, hierarchy can be a very different or has nothing to do with domination. We can see hierarchy also as authority and leadership. Talking about hierarchy in families we are talking about the fact that someone is more or less in charge. More or less because some parents abdicate leadership by treating the kids as equals (trying to construct reality?) or by

acting like the therapists some people don't want to be - trying to control everything, demonstrating the lack of respect and tolerance that's guaranteed to produce rebellion. Someone has to be in charge of therapy, too(Nichols, 1993).

Atkinson thinks that the central issue in discussion of hierarchy concerns the balance of risk to individuals involved in relationships(Atkinson, 1993). If the balance of risk in a relationship is equal for both individuals, he assumed that the relationship can be best described as "heterarchical". In such relationship both persons feel equally able to say no. In hierarchical relationships individuals do not feel equally able to say no. Often, one party stands to lose more than the other if problems arise in the relationship. Atkinson made following assumptions while commentating the therapist client s relationships(Atkinson, 1993):

- I assume that I am often in a position of elevated influence (as therapy begins, clients may be elevating therapist to a position of elevated influence).
- I assume that I often cannot avoid being in a position of elevated influence(clients even more respect therapist's authority once they saw that he/she didn't particularly care to have it).
- I assume that it is possible to abuse my elevated position of influence. There are many forms such abuse takes, f.e. by implying that there is obviously only one explanation for the client's situation, by pathologizing clients who disagree, by facilitating dependency.
- I assume that the appropriateness of my influence is closely related to the degree of congruence between my conscious posture and my more basic emotional reactions.
- I assume that my influence is most appropriate when I focus on clarifying my own process while encouraging clients to focus on clarifying theirs.

As it was said above, therapists have power to name things. The team of three therapists decided to name father of family S to be an alcoholic. The family S came into the family therapy because of 25-years old daughter's drinking. We named father to be alcoholic in the 8th session ; family showed great disapproval and left the therapy. I was sure, that the diagnosis was right - but family has no gain, when we as therapists named the symptom; I think that it would be therapeutic and functional, if family could be able to identified it by themselves(therapist should work more on dialogue between family members).The family S needed "the perfect father " and we as therapists were too intrusive and too

impatient with the "truth". In discussion we pathologized the family that they are "in great denial and too resistant to change"- and that they can't be helped.

While three therapists were working with family H, emotional (and maybe some other) abuse of 16-years old daughter was identified. Father and mother - both drinkers - abused daughter while struggling for the power . They were continuing abusing her also during the sessions. The therapist used her power in the positive way; she clarified the transactions and proposed to the daughter not to sit between the two parents in the session, but to move her chair away from them (she willingly did so). So father and mother had to continue their struggle alone.

CONCLUSIONS

Bateson was " one of the beginners". I understand his insisting on circularity as a benevolent - with a purpose not to stigmatize and not to found guilty the individual. But in some aspects of power, on the field of abuse, his ideas can became even unethical, not only unfunctional. If there is no unilateral power, there's also no individual responsibility. But now it's accepted as a norm, that circular working with abuser is not possible, until he (or she) isn't prepare to take his/her responsibility for abuse. Even if there's no abuse in the family, it is very functional to know, who has the greatest legal power in the family - that is the person with the greatest resources for change. In this sense we missed a lot of times to recognize power as something positive - too many times we conceptualize power as something negative, destructive. If we know, who has the greatest power in the system, than we won't victimize the victim and demand that the weakest member of the system would make the greatest changes.

An Albanian women, an opera singer, is my neighbour. She - even very well educated woman - have to obey decisions of her husband. All surrounding Slovenian (emancipated) women are angry at her, because" she doesn't try hard enough to change the circumstances " - as media also expect from women.

I think that in systemic thinking we should be careful while trying to reframe the most vulnerable member of the family as the most powerful. It can be understood, that he/she is most responsible for the change. From the circular standpoint it is obvious that a little baby is the most powerful member (in "normal" family) - he decides, when mother can sleep etc., but has obviously no legal power.

What about the equality between therapist and clients? They are not equals. Clients are, to paraphrase George Orwell, "more equal" when it comes to whose point of view ultimately counts. Therapists are, or should be, more equal when it comes to training, expertise, and objectivity - and taking the lead in what happens during the therapy hour. It's fine and necessary to criticize power - if what's meant by that is domination and control; it's not so fine to abdicate leadership and responsibility, especially when abuse takes the place.

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