Chapter 3 - Power and Public Policy

Key themes of this chapter

- We need to define power to demonstrate its importance to public policy.
- The 'three dimensions of power' debate focused on our ability to measure power and its outcomes. The most visible forms of power are measurable, but the most worrying and least visible are often not.
- Actors exercise power to treat matters as public problems (worthy of our attention and government intervention) or private issues (none of our business).
- In some cases, we can link power measurement to the right to exercise power, such as when a state's authority is built on popular consent.
- In other cases, power relates to the role of ideas, including: the use of persuasion to set the agenda; and, the beliefs, norms, and rules that are so taken for granted, or unshifting, that we often describe them as structures.
- A key aspect of 'evidence based' policymaking is the power to decide what knowledge – and therefore *who* - counts.

Power is one of the most important but least clear concepts in political science. We need to define it to explain its role in public policy research, and our definition can have a profound effect on what we study. It says much about which aspects of political life we think are most worthy of research, in much the same way that governments declare the problems most worthy of their attention. It also highlights the importance of research methods, since uncertainty about the meaning of power may lead us to wonder how to gather knowledge of it.

In public policy, the question of power arises in its most basic form when we ask: who is in charge or who are the policymakers? Who is responsible for policy change? Who is *thought* to be in charge and who is *actually* in charge? We may also use discussions of power to explain why policies change or remain stable. For example, can policymakers exercise power to force or resist change in the face of opposition? Can power be used to 'set the agenda' and encourage policy change in some areas at the expense of others? Or, can more hidden forms of power such as the manipulation of knowledge and beliefs be used to restrict debate and minimize attention to the need for change? To answer these questions often requires us to broaden our discussions from the exercise of power by individuals to the role of institutions, or from formal sources of authority to informal sources of influence, and to consider the routine and everyday ways in which inequalities of power produce unequal outcomes in society.

Our starting point is the 'community power' debate which prompted debate on three 'dimensions' of power. It began with the modern study of **elitism** and **pluralism**, examining the extent to which power is concentrated or diffuse within government and society. While Hunter (1953; 1980) and Mills (1956) identified the reputations of people in powerful positions to identify **oligarchy**, Dahl (1958) questioned the importance of

reputational power. Dahl suggests that power only has meaning when *exercised* and when we can identify the effects of one actor's power over another during key decisions.

The debate highlighted different understandings of power and how to *observe* it, linking the problem of definition to **methodology**. It continued when Bachrach and Baratz (1962) questioned Dahl's focus on directly observable behaviour (often linked to **behaviouralism**). Power is exercised behind the scenes by 'setting the agenda' and limiting public debate. Or, people may feel powerless because they do not have the opportunity to contribute to key decisions; they cannot find the arena to express their views or feel unable to express them. The 'second face' of power describes 'non-decision-making', including visible attempts to argue that the government should not be involved in private matters, or less-visible actions to ensure that some individuals and groups do not engage.

> **Elitism** – power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people or organizations that control policy outcomes.
> **Oligarchy** is the control of government by elites.
> **Pluralism** – power is more diffuse; policy results from the competition between many individuals and groups.
> **Methodology** – the study of **methods** used to gather knowledge (based on epistemology, or a theory of what knowledge is and how it is created).
> **Behaviouralism** has two broad claims: '(a) observable behaviour … should be the focus of analysis; and (b) any explanation of that behaviour should be susceptible to empirical testing' (Sanders, 2010: 23; 2017).

The second face of power raised the problem of method because it is not easy to observe. The 'third dimensional' view magnifies this problem. Lukes (1974) identifies a process in which some people benefit when others do not act according to their own 'real' interests. Their preferences are manipulated through the control of information and socialization. Power may be furthered by a 'structure' or force, independent of the actions of individuals, such as a dominant ideology or set of rules within government that blocks certain types of action. In broader terms, the exercise of power within institutions is rule bound and not reducible to the sum total of the actions of individuals. Thus, power can be observed, but it can also be theorized from a broader examination of social, economic and political relations. This understanding raises new problems about the language used to describe the 'actions' of structures 'exercising' power and the methods we use to observe allegedly unobservable forms.

During such debates, we examine *proof and measurement*: how do we demonstrate that some are powerful and others are powerless? What is the evidence and where can we find it? Does the right to possess power – such as by an elected government – correspond to the actual exercise of power? The simplest measure of power comes from certain people benefiting regularly from policy outcomes, but note that they can: exercise power directly to get what they want; manipulate others into thinking that the outcome benefits both parties; or, benefit from an outcome without being responsible for it.

However, a *measurement-driven* approach is not exhaustive. It runs a high risk of ignoring aspects of power that we can theorise convincingly without direct observation of action. It may account for the role of ideas in relation to persuasion to set the policy agenda, but not the beliefs, norms, and rules that seem so strong that we describe them as

structures. Most importantly, it may prompt us to ignore fundamental issues of unequal power – in relation to factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality – which are better served by critical theory than behavouralist method.

Box 3.1 Discussions of power

'Power' can refer to many concepts and arguments, including:

- The ability to get what you want despite the resistance of others
- The power to influence the choices of others
- The power to influence an actor's decision-making environment
- Power as a resource or capacity, and the exercise of power
- Power based on popular support, used legitimately or illegitimately
- The power to change or obstruct
- Material sources of power – economic, military, governmental, cultural
- Colonial power, used for the 'control of other people's land and goods', and built on slavery and indentured labour (Loomba, 2007: 8).
- Power as knowledge or embedded in language
- Reputational power
- Achieving compliance by: using overt or tacit threats ('power'), without using threats ('influence'), by restricting someone's choices ('manipulation'), and overcoming their non-compliance ('force'); or, when one's position is respected ('authority') (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 17–38; Arendt, 1986: 64–5)
- The ability of a social class to realize its interests
- Decision or non-decision making (two 'faces' of power)
- Three 'dimensions' of power
- Power diffusion or centralization
- Power versus systematic luck
- Inequalities of power related to gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexuality

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Definitions of power

The concept of power encompasses a vast range of behaviours, including the ability to get what you want despite the resistance of others, the possession of authority based on consent, and the inability to exercise autonomy when subject to 'structural' power. Power may be: exercised visibly or hidden from view; used for collective ends or at the expense of others; concentrated or diffuse; and, used for legitimate or insidious purposes. It may be associated with visible reputations that affect the actions of others, or more subtle inequalities with less obvious effects. In some discussions, power may encompass or be treated as synonymous with terms such as influence, authority and force; in others it may be differentiated from them (Box 3.1).

A key normative theme is that the use of power should not get in the way of 'democracy' (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 220). For example, we know that there are

inequalities within politics and society, but hope that there are safeguards on governmental and non-governmental actors to limit their effects (Dahl, 1961). The study of power focuses on the extent to which inequalities in the possession of power translate into political outcomes. The key empirical themes are as follows. First, power can be understood as the capacity and potential to act; as a resource to be used. However, second, we may not know how much power an actor has until they exercise it and we analyse the outcomes. Third, it is relatively difficult to identify the exercise of power by actors who are not individuals: can institutions and 'structures' act to exercise power? Finally, how do we study power? Should we use interviews to establish the reputations of elites or gauge the power of participants when key decisions are made? Should we deduce and theorize power relations from language, and observed and unobserved behaviour? Many answers to these questions are rehearsed in the 'community power' debate, which led to comparisons of *three dimensions of power*, and explored in critical policy studies.

Three dimensions of power: winning key decisions, agenda setting, and thought control

The first dimension: a debate on elitism and pluralism

Early 20th century studies of democracy sought to address elitism based on the assumption that it is inevitable within society. Schumpeter (1942) developed an economic theory of democracy to show that the electorate could still be involved by choosing between (and influencing the policies of) elites. However, Lasswell (1936) identified a wider power structure less constrained by popular control. Power can be identified in a range of groups – the military, police, state bureaucracy, business and professions which control the communication of knowledge – and, if combined, could contribute to authoritarian rule (Parsons, 1995: 248–50).

Two books summed up elitism studies in the post-war period. Hunter's (1953) study of power in Atlanta, US - based on interviews asking respondents to list its most powerful people (*who runs this community*?) - identified a small group of elites. Mills' (1956: 4) more theoretical study identified a US-wide male elite based on control of the 'big corporations', the 'machinery of the state' and the 'military establishment' (US President Eisenhower coined it the 'military–industrial complex'). This identification of a centralized order, contrasting with the formal US system of checks and balances, confirms Lasswell's greatest fears (Mills, 1956: 4–5). Elites at the 'top' have the means to control key events, while the fragmentation of 'mass-like society' at the 'bottom', combined with the ineffectiveness of 'middling units of power' (such as political parties), undermines the competition to influence policy outcomes (1956: 28–9; 361).

The key critique of this conception of power regards its method: how do we demonstrate its accuracy empirically? Dahl (1958; see also Polsby, 1960: 483; Kaufman and Jones, 1954: 207; Wolfinger, 1960) criticizes the 'ruling elite model' because it does not demonstrate the *exercise* of power. Rather, it posits an unobservable process of covert control which is 'virtually impossible to disprove' (Dahl, 1958: 463; 1961: 185; Polsby,

1960: 476). The statement '*A* has more power than *B*' has no meaning unless they have different preferences and the ruling minority's preferences are met at the expense of other groups (1958: 464). We must demonstrate that large and powerful organizations are controlled by elites and that inequalities in society translate into systematic advantages across the political system (1958: 465–6). Dahl's classic statement is that, '*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can [or *does*] get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise

Operationalize - to turn abstract concepts into observable and measurable units.

do'. To demonstrate power requires the identification of: A's resources, A's means to exploit those resources, A's willingness to engage in political action, the amount of power exerted (or threatened) by A and the *scope* of that power, defined as effect of the action on B (Dahl, 1957: 202–3; 206; Polsby, 1960: 480). Overall, Dahl (1957: 214) points to the problems we face when we **operationalize** power.

Dahl's approach is to identify 'key political choices', involving a significant conflict of preferences and the outcomes of 'concrete decisions' (see also Polsby, 1960: 483–4). Using this test as part of a wider study of New Haven, US, Dahl (1961) identifies three main processes. First, there has been a shift since the eighteenth century 'from oligarchy to pluralism'. A ruling class based on the monopoly of elected positions by elites with high social status, education and wealth (the 'Notables') has given way to elections of the 'middle classes', 'ex-plebes' and formerly 'ethnic immigrant' populations whose status, wealth and education have risen (1961: 11; 32; 44). Although there are inequalities, they are 'dispersed' rather than 'cumulative': superior status and wealth no longer translates to a superior ability to control elected and unelected office (1961: 84). Although the power associated with money and status is significant, it now competes with the independent power of elected office and the vast range of political resources available to other actors, including time, esteem, support of the law and control of information.

Second, there is a democratic link – albeit imperfect - between policymakers and the electorate. Political participation, and entry into the 'political stratum', is highest among populations with the highest incomes, education and social and professional standing (Dahl, 1961: 282–3). The 'political stratum' is small and much more active and influential in politics than the 'apolitical strata'. Yet, it is not a closed group based on class interests; it is penetrable by anyone with the resources and motivation. Further, its members seek to build coalitions with the apolitical strata for straightforward practical reasons – to aid re-election (1961: 91–2) or avoid its wrath and *potential* to mobilize (1961: 310) – and cultural reasons: 'democracy' is a powerful idea supported by the political stratum and the apolitical strata (1961: 316–7). The political stratum acts *as if* the apolitical strata are involved by anticipating their reactions. Further, since the political stratum is heterogeneous, most groups in the apolitical strata can find a powerful advocate (1961: 93).

Third, although there are significant inequalities in politics there is no overall control of the policy process. Although the Notables control policymaking positions in some sectors, they do not control others. Public policy is specialized; the sheer size and fragmentation of political systems ensures that the reach of one actor does not extend across all areas: 'the individuals who spend time, energy and money in an attempt to

influence policies in one issue-area are rather different to those who do so in another' (1961: 273–4; 126; 169; 180; see also Polsby, 1960; 482; Moran, 2005: 16).

Therefore, for pluralists, it is tempting to change the question from 'Who runs this community' to 'Does anyone at all run this community?' (Polsby, 1960: 476). However, we should not exaggerate their position, which is not to identify the total absence of power imbalances. In modern studies of policy networks and subsystems (Chapters 8–10), the literature supports Dahl's argument that public policy is specialized; the size and fragmentation of political systems ensures that the reach of one actor does not extend across all areas. However, many actors are disproportionately powerful *within* subsystems, suggesting that the dividing lines between elitism and pluralism are blurry. Pluralism is elitism's 'close cousin' (Moran; 2005: 16; Barry, 1980b: 350).

The 'second face' of power
Subsequent debates were based as much on a critique of pluralist *methods* as definitions of power. Bachrach and Baratz argue (1962: 948; against Polsby, 1960: 477) that since there is no objective way for pluralists to identify key decisions we cannot demonstrate their representativeness. Therefore, the identification of pluralism in some case studies does not demonstrate pluralism overall. Indeed, the modern study of agenda setting (Chapter 9) suggests that power is as much about the issues we do *not* identify. A powerful actor may successfully focus our attention on one issue at the expense of attention to others *without the need to engage* or discourage action in those other areas. Since policymaking attention is limited, the agenda-setting success of one group in one area may cause the failure of many groups in many others (Crenson, 1971: 25). Therefore, the pluralist focus on observable decision-making events does not take into account the second 'face' of power associated with the terms 'non-decision making', 'mobilization of bias' and 'un-politics'.

For Bachrach and Baratz (1970: 94), key decisions are not gauged by the size of the policy area or the degree of conflict, but by the extent to which a decision challenges the, 'authority of those who regularly enjoy a dominant position in the determination of policy outputs'. Power may be exercised to protect that dominant position; to restrict the attention of other actors to 'safe' issues: when A devotes her 'energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: 948). When A is successful, B is prevented from engaging in decisions which threaten A's preferences. Therefore, issues displaying differences between A and B are not necessarily important; B may 'win' decisions which are innocuous to A.

The less-powerful face two major barriers to engagement. First, they may be disadvantaged by the dominant view within society that favours some ideologies over others. For example, most may feel that an issue is not a legitimate problem for governments to solve - such as when issues of poverty are defined as a matter of individual or family responsibility - or that the solution proposed is not worth considering (such as a 'socialist' solution in a capitalist society). Power may be exercised to reinforce this view of an issue, to discourage people from thinking that it is a policy problem (Crenson,

1971: 180–1). Second, their grievances may be kept off the agenda by policymaking organizations and institutions. For example, a government may fill unelected posts with people committed to the status quo, or the most powerful may discourage the formal discussion of certain issues (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 54–9; 70; Hay, 2002: 175). Actor A may contribute to a social or institutional climate in which there is a high chance of failure and/or a fear of sanctions for challenging the status quo, contributing to B's inability or reluctance to engage (Hay, 2002: 175 draws parallels to speaking out against the 'local godfather').   Overall, Bachrach and Baratz (1970: 105–6) argue that the 'dominant group' manipulates the values of society and the procedures of government to ensure that the grievances of 'subordinate groups' are not aired. Political systems reinforce a 'set of values, beliefs, rituals and procedures' which cause an unequal distribution of 'benefits and privileges'. Such undemocratic rule by elites meets minimal opposition because those elites manipulate the decision-making process (Hindess, 1996: 5).

The main problem with the 'second face' of power (from the perspective of pluralist method) is that some aspects may be impossible to demonstrate empirically. Bachrach and Baratz's (1970) solution is to draw on Schattschneider's 'mobilization of bias' to show that non-decision making can be observed in, for example, agenda setting to draw attention to some issues at the expense of all others (Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy

Imagine two ways to consider democracy. First, politics will remain 'broken' until we rediscover popular democracy. Second, almost all decisions are made, necessarily, by a small number of people out of the public spotlight. How might we reconcile these arguments? Schattschneider (1960: 136) argues that a political system can be run well if most decisions are made by the government on behalf of the people, with minimal public involvement, and a small number of key decisions is made with maximal public involvement. In this scenario, 'the people' matter when they pay attention and become mobilized. However, there are far more potential conflicts than any public can pay attention to. Most are ignored and the people are 'semi-sovereign': able to exercise their power in a few areas. Further, political systems do not ensure that key issues receive the most public attention. Rather, actors exercise power to make sure that people pay attention to innocuous issues at the expense of the more important.

Schattschneider (1960: 2–5) creates a thought experiment to demonstrate this argument. Think of two fighters surrounded by a massive crowd: its composition, bias towards each fighter and willingness to engage are crucial. The outcome of conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved. Since the audience is biased and only a small part will become engaged, the mobilization of one part changes the balance of power. This possibility affects the strategies of participants: the 'loser' has the incentive to expand the scope of the conflict by encouraging a part of the audience to become involved; the 'winner' would prefer to isolate its opponent. Most political behaviour involves this competition to 'socialize' or 'privatize' conflict, often using widely held values such as 'equality' and 'social protection' versus 'individualism', 'small government' (1960: 7–8) or 'this is a private matter'.

The ability to privatise or socialise matters is distributed unevenly. Politics is largely the preserve of the well-educated, upper class, and business class seeking to minimize attention to their activities (1960: 30–7). Therefore, Schattschneider (1960: 12; 119) highlights the need for government to intervene: 'Democratic government is the greatest single instrument for the socialization of conflict … big business has to be matched by … big democracy'. The government becomes the audience to conflicts.

However, there are more potential conflicts than any government can manage. Actors exercise power to determine the issues most worthy of government attention. The structures of government, such as legislative procedures controlling debate, reinforce this process by determining which conflicts receive attention: 'All forms of political organization have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out' (1960: 69). This ability to keep issues off the agenda means that we do not witness the exercise of power by all participants in 'key decisions'.

Crenson (1971) extended this argument in his study of air pollution policy in US cities. His three key points are that: (1) post-war levels of public attention to air pollution were low compared to the problem; (2) attention varied in different cities; and (3) while some cities passed legislation to regulate air pollution during manufacturing, others did not. In the case study of Gary (Indiana, US), he finds evidence of non-decision making when: the Mayor delayed the study of air pollution, the study's authors (funded by manufacturing industries) underestimated the contribution of manufacturing to air pollution and anticipated the response of US Steel while recommending weak enforcement policies, and the City Council delayed its ruling (1971: 64–5).

Overall, important issues are kept off the political agenda either by powerful interests who reinforce social attitudes and manipulate decision-making procedures, while the powerless pay minimal attention to an issue or feel unable to engage. Crucially, although Bachrach and Baratz (1970: 49–50) take the analysis beyond highly visible events, they share with pluralists a view on the limits to empirical analysis: one or more party has to recognize that a power struggle exists. If the researcher finds no grievance: 'the presumption must be that there is consensus on the prevailing allocation of values, in which case non-decision making is impossible'.

The third dimension of power
This statement represents the line between the second face and 'third dimension', which theorizes unequal power relationships despite the appearance of consensus (Lukes, 1974; 2005). The third dimension suggests that everyone may seem to be in agreement because B does not recognize her 'real' interests and A benefits from the relationship at her expense. The **counterfactual** is that if given the chance, or made aware of a way to pursue her real interests, B would act differently.

> **Counterfactual** – a statement used to explore what would happen under different circumstances (such as if the opposite were true).

The difference in analysis is highlighted to some extent by Crenson's argument that US Steel did not have to engage in non-decision making. Rather, the population regulated itself and its government continued to promote weak regulations. These behaviours were based on their anticipation of an unfavourable reaction (Crenson, 1971: 67–70; 122–3). Gary was a town built and kept alive by US Steel, which commanded considerable loyalty. US Steel's strategy was to say very little in public to make sure that it did not contribute to the issue's salience (1971: 72). This strategy, combined with the effect of US Steel's reputation on the population's behaviour, assured its dominance.

US Steel's *inaction* was emulated by Gary (1971: 78). The issue was not raised even though unregulated air pollution represents a source of profit for business and ill-health for the population. By accepting the pollution *unwittingly*, the population was not acting in its real interests (assuming pollution control would not cause unemployment – Lukes, 2005: 48). If made aware fully of the facts, the population would act differently to promote environmental regulations. Instead, its ability to articulate different preferences or support a new understanding of the situation (from economics to health) were undermined by an unfavourable 'political climate' (Crenson, 1971: 23). The population would not pay attention to the issue until US Steel was supportive.

While this climate was fostered by US Steel and Gary's institutions, the third dimension is not easily observed. In this case, the 'mere reputation for power, unsupported by acts of power, can be sufficient to restrict the scope of local decision making' (1971: 125; 177). Therefore, Lukes (2005: 12; 1) warns against equating power with its exercise: 'Power is a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be, and never need to be, exercised)' and 'power is at its most effective when least observable'. The behaviour of all concerned may suggest consensus rather than dominance, with no easy way to demonstrate one rather than the other. Indeed, it may be that B supports her own exploitation while A does not believe that she is acting against B's real interests (although Lukes' argument seems to describe intended consequences). Yet, in some cases, the third dimension may still be visible if we can demonstrate that A manipulates B's beliefs. This is the power to:

> Prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things … the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires (2005: 11–2; 27; 14).

The classic example of 'false consciousness' comes from Marxist descriptions of the exploitation of the working classes within a capitalist system: if only they knew the full facts, that capitalism worked against their real interests, they would rise up and overthrow it. They do not object because they are manipulated into thinking that capitalism is their best chance of increasing their standard of living. In effect, Lukes describes 'hegemony' in which the most powerful dominate state institutions *and* the intellectual and moral world in which we decide which actions are most worthy of attention and which are right or wrong (Gramsci, 1971). Capitalist dominance is 'based on a combination of coercion

and consent' (Hindess, 1996: 5). The 'most effective and insidious use of power' is to prevent conflict through the control of information and media, as well as a process of socialization (Lukes, 2005: 27).

Observing the unobservable

How do we identify the third dimension if it is so difficult to observe? For example, does Lukes satisfy the pluralist focus on *demonstrable* power? From a pluralist standpoint, the answer is 'no'. Dahl (1958: 469) argues that if a 'consensus is perpetual and unbreakable … there is no conceivable way of determining who is ruler and who is ruled'. Instead, concepts such as 'real interests' and 'false class consciousness' represent *the imposition of a theorist's values on the research* (Polsby, 1960: 479). Similarly, Polsby (1980: 97) argues that Crenson's argument regarding 'un-politics' is undermined by the potentially infinite number of non-issues, which requires a choice about which non-issues are the most important; it would be inappropriate for an outsider to call an issue important when the population doesn't.

Lukes (2005: 27) addresses the former problem by identifying third dimensional processes in Dahl's work, such as when the government shapes public preferences by restricting the flow of information or indoctrinates the population to ensure a widespread respect for the legitimacy of government and democracy. Crenson's (1971: 26–8) response to the latter is to compare levels of attention to the same problem by similar populations in different cities, asking why it is important in one but not the other. It predicts what a city's population would do by establishing the actions of an equivalent city's population in the absence of un-politics (1971: 33). This use of the comparative method is necessary to establish Dahl's focus on 'something that *B* would not otherwise do'. Crenson (1971: 80; 108; 182) also extends Dahl's argument that the political stratum acts in anticipation of the reactions of the apolitical stratum. If we accept that decision makers anticipate the reactions of the public to raise some issues, then we should accept that they anticipate the reactions of 'big business' to not raise others. This may not be observed in 'key decisions'. Indeed, the pluralist focus on air pollution policy in *other* cities would exaggerate non-business power because it would focus only on the examples in which the issue had become politicized (1971: 131). Therefore, the focus on observable decisions may be as misleading and biased as the decision to deduce power from less visible relationships.

Thus, non-pluralistic processes can be identified by extending pluralist methods, but has the burden of proof been met? The answer from Polsby is 'no'. While Crenson's comparative method is commendable, Polsby (1980: 214–7) argues that no data provided by Crenson demonstrates that US Steel was powerfully inactive. Rather, given the importance of US Steel to Gary's economy, the population decided to trade-off clean air for employment. Lukes' (2005: 48) assumption that pollution control would not cause unemployment had no basis in fact (suggesting that it may not have been in their real interests to challenge the status quo), while Jones' (1975 in Polsby, 1980: 217) study of air pollution in Pittsburgh suggests that populations do not trade off their health for employment *unwittingly*. Although Lukes (2005: 148) argues that Gary could act in its

'real interests' by pursuing US-wide regulations, this is based on the *assumption* that there would be no unintended consequences.

All assessments of power are empirical *and* normative

Empirical discussions of power are also normative. In the absence of infinite knowledge and perspective, ideological norms fill the gaps in policy studies. This argument is most clear in criticisms that the pluralist literature serves partly to legitimate the pluralist ideal by distracting us from the undemocratic role of elites (Hindess, 1996: 5; Hay, 2002: 175; but note that Dahl 1961: 3–5; 86; 330–6 goes to great lengths to identify and measure inequalities). However, we can make similar comments on bias within second face and third dimensional discussions. For example, Crenson (1971: 180) is really arguing that power gets in the way of democracy when elites do not compete over what *he thinks* are relatively important issues. Or, Marxists may bemoan the lack of working class awareness of their real interests because *they believe* that the capitalist system exploits them. They may be right or wrong but the 'facts' will not adjudicate for us.

Although we may be able to witness manipulation or the shaping of preferences, we cannot state with certainty if it is done to advance or thwart someone's 'real' interests. In this context, most attempts to separate completely the empirical and analytical from the normative seem doomed (compare with Hay, 2002: 187). The same can be said for discussions of state 'paternalism' when constraining the freedoms of its citizens ostensibly for their own good. Or, while we may identify the government-driven socialization of its subjects in, for example, the promotion of 'citizenship', this may be more for legitimate reasons (to encourage participation in politics) than insidious (to foster passive consent) (Hindess, 1996: 72).

The normative dimension also suggests that power is about more than the *ability* to act. It is also about the *right* to act. For example, how much power is exercised with the 'consent of those over whom it is exercised' (Hindess, 1996: 1; 11; see also Arendt, 1986: 62)? The identification of consent giving the capacity to exercise power over others may be most clear with democratically elected governments. In this sense, government action notionally combines the power of all who consent (1996: 15). As Hindess (1996: 13) suggests, at the heart of such relationships is the notion of a contract in which those vested with the right to exercise power are under certain obligations not to abuse that right, in part by upholding the values of those who consent.

On the other hand, since one function of government is to regulate the attitudes and behaviour of its citizens for the collective good, it produces a circular effect: consent for government action is based on government-influenced attitudes (1996: 43). Governments may also weigh up the potential trade-offs between the welfare and liberty of their citizens. In this sense, government control and legitimacy may be assumed until citizens have the ability to give 'rational consent' (1996: 74; 118). Indeed, the criteria used to gauge an individual's or social group's ability to reason may also be determined by that government. Therefore, much political theory regards the appropriateness and effectiveness of such contracts and our ability to demonstrate that consent has been given in a meaningful way, usually via representative democracy, to an organization with a

recognizable unity of purpose and a clearly accountable 'centre'. Similarly, discussions of democracy explore the extent to which other forms – such as participative, deliberative and pluralist democracy – provide more legitimacy and a clearer link between consent and the right to exercise power.

Beyond the third dimension: Foucault and Habermas

Hay (2002: 170–1; 187–93; see also Hindess, 1996: 38) suggests that a debate on the extent to which power is measurable is a peculiarly Anglo-US activity. The main alternative examines whether power is so embedded in our language and practices that it is impossible to be liberated from it. Foucault (1977) presents two ways in which liberation may be impossible by drawing on the idea of society modelled on a prison.

First, the power of the state to monitor and punish may reach the point at which its subjects assume they are always visible. This 'perfection of power' – associated with the 'Panopticon', in which it is possible for a guard to observe all prisoners from one position – renders the direct exercise of power unnecessary (1977: 201; Hay, 2002: 191). Rather, individuals accept that discipline is a fact of life and anticipate the consequences of their actions - from cheating at school and slacking off at work, to colluding in crimes and forming organizations that challenge the state - and regulate their own behaviour.

Second, a broader form of control is so embedded in our psyches, knowledge and language, that it is 'normalized' and often rendered invisible. Consider, for example, mental health in which the 'knowledge' and identification of severe mental illness inevitably produces the perceived need for medical treatment. Or, we 'know' which forms of behaviour are deviant and therefore should be regulated or punished (the most extreme form of socialization that we can imagine?). Therefore, power is exercised not only by the state, but also communities and individuals who reproduce and reinforce it by controlling their *own* behaviour and the behaviour of others. It is a ubiquitous form of social control which undermines notions of collective power or government authority granted freely by the consent of individuals (Hindess, 1996: 145).

Foucault's work contrasts with the idea that individuals are capable of giving consent based on their ability to reason and identify their own preferences (Chapter 7).

> **Ideal-type** – an analytical construct that serves as a comparator and point of departure for 'real world' descriptions of events and behaviour (compare with the definition in Chapter 1)

Rather, individual bodies and minds represent the ultimate hub of repressive power because individuals regulate their own behaviour and suppress many expressions of their own preferences (Lukes, 2005: 91–3). As such, rationality may be described best as an **ideal-type** to be compared with our perception of reality, to help us theorize power relationships. For example, Habermas (1984) identifies an 'ideal-speech situation' which 'refers to a condition of uncoerced discussion between free and equal individuals in which … communication will be organized around the attempt to reach rationally motivated agreement' (Hindess, 1996: 92). In that context, the use of language for communication - to act collectively to help understand the world and each other – is undermined by the use of language to dominate or coerce. It is built on the use of words

to refer to traditions, norms, and rules that define the context in which any conversation takes place. Communication results, 'at best in agreement, or rather the appearance of agreement, arising from fear, deference, insecurity and other such non-rational motivations' (1996: 93). In other words, significant power is exercised via social forces that are difficult for the researcher to *detect* far less *measure* because often the most threatening communications are made using innocuous-looking statements or commonplace language (1996: 93). In this context, we theorise the profoundly imbalanced power relations from everyday interaction, in which some actors control others routinely rather than in high profile key events.

Such discussions may have been precluded by the pluralist focus on method because it is not clear how you could *recognize* this form of power far less measure it. Still it highlights the limits to our reliance on research methods focusing entirely on observable behaviour. When individuals regulate themselves in the 'private' sphere, power is difficult to observe in public policy (Hay, 2002: 169). Therefore, a focus on *the most observable* forms of power should remind us of the story of the drunkards searching for their keys under a lamppost, not because they are there, but because there is more light (Hogwood, 1992)! The most interesting and worrying forms of power – and the practices we may most want to challenge - are the most difficult to research.

Power and Critical Theory: the emancipatory role for research

Wouldn't it be odd if researchers became so divorced from the real world that they had (or *thought* they had, or *pretended to have*) no normative positions? Donning a white lab coat and asserting a hierarchy of research methods makes us political actors, not objective scientists (Douglas, 2009; Fischer, 1998). A contrasting role for research, often described as 'critical' scholarship, is to:

> 'produce social change that will empower, enlighten, and emancipate …Critical theories need to offer their audience (those who are oppressed) an alternative conception of who they are, providing them with a new and radically different picture of their political, economic, and social order. Critical social science also aims to empower its audience to take action' (Schneider and Ingram, 1997: 51).

The need to overthrow the status quo raises the stakes so high that you can understand why the problem of power measurement would not stop a critical scholar in their tracks. As with policymakers, the urgent need to act provides a new perspective: issues of power measurement may seem technical from a narrowly scientific perspective, but highly political when we seek to relate them to 'normative criteria such as social justice, democracy and empowerment' (Fischer et al, 2015: 1).

To explore these issues, let's describe examples of power in relation to gender, race, and other causes or indicators of inequality, notionally from most to least measurable. A classic observable case is the *control of elected office* and its impact on politics and policy. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018) identifies more male than female representation in 190 of 193 national parliaments. Men account for more than 70%

of seats in more than 70% of cases. Such imbalances can be self-reinforcing: male incumbency limits new opportunities for participation and signals to women that their efforts may be relatively unrewarded, in the context of electoral campaigns in which women face misogyny routinely, including verbal assault, intimidation, and/or physical threat and assault (also note that these imbalances exist in positions of unelected power, such as the civil service, unions, and academia – Woodward, 2004; Curtin, 2018; Carey et al, 2018). There is also some debate within feminist movements about the value of elected office: (a) as a way to ensure substantive representation of feminist issues, which could include violence, pornography, reproductive rights, poverty, equal pay, rights for women of colour, and LGBT rights; or, (b) as a distraction from more radical ways to challenge patriarchal political systems (Evans, 2014: 148; see also Boyle, 2005).

When describing *non-decision making and the privatisation of issues*, feminist studies identify power relationships that are reinforced in '"personal" relationships such as child-rearing, housework and marriage and in all kinds of sexual practices including rape, prostitution, pornography, sexual harassment and sexual intercourse' (Abbott et al, 2005: 35). These relationships are often exacerbated by other sources of inequalities – including class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, and age – which reinforce social positions and undermine their ability to mobilize (for example, some women may contribute to the subordination of others). Further, since power relations are multi-faceted, debates on unequal power can be framed differently, from (for example) the power to be treated equally to the right to be different without fear of the consequences (Bock and James, 1992).

A key link to the community power debate regards the ability to 'socialize' or 'privatize' such issues to place them on, or keep them off, the policy agenda. The phrase 'this is a private matter' can have more weight in family politics than in business. Or, socialising phrases can be repurposed cynically. For example, 'community development' can encourage a focus on *social justice*, using the state as a tool for redistribution, but also provide cover for *social welfare cuts*, using a focus on community autonomy to justify forms of state retrenchment, particularly during periods of state-led 'austerity' (Emejulu, 2016; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). Such retrenchment may be framed by governments as responsible and equally painful but have an unequal impact, particularly when many sources of inequality – 'gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and national origin' - intersect (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017: 9).

To describe *third dimensional power*, Heyward (2007: 53) uses the example of a father denying his daughter education to illuminate the difference between *dominance* (power over someone which undermines their real interests) and *potestas* (power over someone with a benign effect). We must first take a normative position (does this action undermine her real interests because education should be available to all?) before deciding which form of power has been exercised. Also note the role of context, in which we are not sure if the dominant actor is reproducing traditions and norms or making strategic choices.

Indeed, many forms of power relationship seem invisible because they are taken for granted or treated as natural. We use gender routinely as a way to understand our relationships with other people, and people draw routinely on norms of male and female

behaviour from birth, such as when they link adjectives (strong/ pretty), colours (blue/pink), and ambitions (to be an astronaut or nurse) to babies as if aspects of their lives are predetermined (Ridgeway, 2011; Ahmed, 2017). Key choices, such as to deny education, may be described as abhorrent in one context but natural in another.

> **Epistemic violence** – the act of dismissing an individual, social group, or population by undermining the value of their knowledge or claim to knowledge. Spivak (1988) relates it primarily to the acts of the colonial West to subjugate colonized populations, with reference to the 'subaltern' (someone of low social status, oppressed or excluded from society) (see also Rutazibwa and Shilliam, 2018)

Or, some of the most worrying forms of power may result from a selective approach to knowledge and sources of knowledge. Terms like '**epistemic violence**' seem alien if we (a) focus on observable forms of power and (b) do not question a narrow scientific definition of knowledge. In this context, the request to prove a power relationship - 'where is the evidence?' - seems reasonable. However, if we focus on dominance through language and everyday practices, epistemic violence seems like a logical extension of a profoundly important 'critical' argument. Examples include:

- privileging scientific knowledge 'in Europe by white male scientists' at the expense of 'other epistemologies and other ways of representing knowledge', for example by asserting that 'personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific' (Hall and Tandon, 2017: 7; Fonow and Cook, 2005: 2213)
- marginalising feminist research in mainstream social science (Lovenduski, 1998; Guerrina et al, 2018)
- erasing the voices of women of colour from the history of women's activism (Emejulu, 2018) and intellectual history (Cooper, 2017)
- dismissing knowledge claims, such as about the impact of Western economic growth on climate change, by 'indigenous peoples and poorer communities in a number of developing countries' (Munshi and Kurian, 2005: 516)
- explaining patterns of social inequality in relation to the flaws of the unsuccessful individuals (and 'merit' of the successful) rather than the systemic rules and norms described by people who are excluded routinely from positions of power (Ahmed, 2017).

In this context, the request for evidence seems more like a political position designed to protect the status quo by undermining those who challenge it. To demand explanation is to demand high levels of intellectual labour from others without considering the cost.

Are such forms of power 'structural'?

As chapters 1 and 6 suggest, 'structure and agency' are at the heart of such discussions of power. The third dimension of power, and its example of the working classes unaware of their real interests, highlights the language used to describe how political structures influence behaviour. Poulantzas (1986: 146 and in Lukes, 2005: 54–6) describes perhaps the most extreme version of this argument, defining power as 'the capacity of a class to

realize specific objective interests'. In this context the state is an 'objective system of regular connections' to further the interests of a class.   It is the ultimate expression of structural power if exercised on behalf of classes by *individuals with no autonomy to make choices* (Miliband in Lukes, 2005: 56).

Although some accounts treat rules and norms as akin to physical structures (Ahmed, 2017: 30), few take it to the extreme of denying agency, while some reject this

> **Actors** – entities such as individuals, groups and governments with the means to deliberate and make choices

language completely.   For Dowding (1991: 9–10; 2003: 306) and Lukes (2005: 57) the term 'structural power' makes no sense because the 'exercise' of power requires the exerciser to have an ability to choose how to act, and structures cannot act. Only **actors** can act and be held responsible for their actions.

Dowding suggests that 'structural power' is used to explain outcomes in the interests of certain actors (such as capitalists) when those actors do not exercise power themselves. This point is central to Crenson's (1971: 125) argument that those with powerful reputations often enjoy favourable policy outcomes without exercising power. For Dowding (1991; compare with Barry, 1980a; 1980b; 2002) , it may be better described as systematic 'luck' (Box 3.4). People are 'lucky' when they benefit from policy outcomes - without exercising power - because their interests coincide with those of someone else exercising power. It can explain why some groups appear to get more of what they want than their 'powers' would suggest (Dowding, 2003: 316).

Box 3.4 Power and systematic luck

The term 'luck' conjures an image of randomness and serendipity (Smith: 2009: 39; Lukes and Haglund, 2005: 49). 'Systematic luck' suggests that we are talking about someone who is randomly lucky a lot! Yet, Barry (1980a: 184) and Dowding (1996: 71; 2009) are not describing randomness. Luck refers to someone who enjoys favourable political outcomes as the *by-product of the behaviour of someone else*. Systematic luck occurs 'because of the way society is structured … Actors denoted by their social location have powers based upon their social resources, and they also have luck based upon their social location' (1996: 71–2).

For example, 'capitalists' benefit disproportionately from the decision by almost everyone, for their own reasons, to maintain capitalism and support economic growth rather than seek socialism. Socialist parties may know that socialism is impossible in the short term and will wreck their re-election chances, while the working classes may not want to endure decades of pain before securing long-term benefits (1996: 73). The result is more beneficial to capitalists than other actors even though they did not determine the outcome.

The identification of 'luck' does not preclude power. Capitalists can be lucky (enjoying outcomes caused by the actions of someone else) *and* powerful (exploiting their position and resources to influence outcomes). Similarly, groups can be powerless *and* unlucky. They are powerless when they struggle to mobilize effectively and have no effective leadership or powerful sponsor (1996: 38–40); McLean, 1987: 66–7; compare

with Lukes and Haglund, 2005: 50–2). They are unlucky if they lose out when other people make decisions.

However, we still need to conceptualize the socio-economic pressures that actors (including policymakers) face; the feeling that they often seem powerless or act in an environment that is often beyond their control (Chapter 6).   In this context, structural power describes situations which appear to make 'certain acts unthinkable or physically impossible' or 'so costly that actors are structurally constrained from carrying them out' (Ward, 1987: 602). This is not a million miles from Dowding's (1996: 44; against. Hay, 2004a: 51) suggestion that (a) 'we have no choice' really means 'the best course of action seems obvious' (see also Hindess, 1988: 97) and (b) Dowding's (1991: 9) statement, 'the power of individuals is in part determined (or rather structurally suggested) by their positions in the social structure').   So, there is widespread disagreement about how to *describe* this relationship between structure and agency, but more agreement that individuals do not act unconditionally and that some structures are more difficult to overcome than others.

Where does the role of power stop and ideas begin?

Our discussion of power is really a discussion of power and **ideas** (Kettell and Cairney, 2010; Béland, 2010). Indeed, most chapters discuss their interaction. Agenda setting involves the ability of groups to 'frame' issues to limit the number of participants in policy

> **Ideas** – shared beliefs or ways of thinking (see Chapter 11)

networks (Chapter 9).   The advocacy coalition framework highlights the shared beliefs of advocacy coalitions and their ability to establish a dominant way to interpret policy-relevant evidence (Chapter 10).   Hall (1993: 287) identifies policy paradigms, or ways of thinking about policy problems that are institutionalized or so ingrained in the psyche that they are often taken for granted (Chapters 5 and 11).

The literature also explores what it would take to change those arrangements; how power could be exercised to challenge existing beliefs and change the way policymakers think and act.   For example, when actors exercise power, some invoke key aspects of widely shared beliefs to limit attention and participation, while others frame issues in new ways to challenge such barriers to policymaking engagement.   Bachrach and Baratz's (1970: 54–9; 98) first barrier to engagement is the dominant set of beliefs held within society, which can endure but be overcome. Their study of the politics of poverty in Baltimore suggests that these barriers were overcome over the longer term, as the previously excluded Black population became increasingly powerful, buoyed by anti-poverty groups and more able, over time, to identify, become aware of and influence 'arenas of conflict'.   Further, air pollution now receives much more attention.   Indeed, Crenson (1971: 69–71; 79) suggests that Gary shifted its policy first by learning lessons and transferring policy from Allegheny Pennsylvania, aided by federal government regulations which reduced the ability of large companies to play cities off against each other.

However, many discussions of power and ideas seem more difficult to resolve. Luke's third dimension focuses on what people believe to be their real interests and the extent to which those perceptions can be manipulated. Foucault's social control is based on common knowledge of normality and deviant behaviour. The exercise of power through routine practice involves the correspondence between everyday language and firmly held beliefs with a profound impact. When processing *issues*, the identification of extreme policy failures or external 'shocks' to the political system (such as a crisis or change in government) may prompt policymakers to engage in a fundamental rethink of their beliefs and seek out participants with new ideas. Or, the ideas and policies adopted by other governments may prompt policymakers to learn lessons and transfer policy (Chapter 12). However, it is more difficult to identify such an immediate and profound shift in attitudes to *populations*, particularly when policymakers believe in or exploit social stereotypes to maintain inequalities (Chapter 4).

Conclusion

Power has a wide variety of meanings, including the *capacity* for action: the ability to get what you want, affect the behaviour of others, and alter the decision-making environment. In turn, this ability can be related to inequalities, or the relative powers of individuals, social groupings and institutions. It also refers to the *exercise* of power which, in some cases, is visible and measurable. This focus on measurement underpins key debates in the literature, including the community power debate.

While the modern elitist position suggests that power can be inferred from reputations and the possession of powerful positions in society, the pluralist critique is that power must be demonstrated and observed. Pluralist empirical studies of 'key issues' suggest that, although power is dispersed unequally throughout society, it does not translate into overall control of the policy process. Rather, the control of elected and unelected office is diffuse and the sheer size and fragmentation of the state ensures that the reach of one powerful actor does not extend across all policy areas.

Critics of the pluralist position argue that it ignores the role of *non-decision making*, in which the powerless are prevented from engaging in policymaking, and the *mobilization of bias*, in which some issues are 'organized out' of the policymaking process. Therefore, a focus on observable decision making in which one actor wins at the expense of another ignores the extent to which power is exercised, less visibly, to keep issues off the political agenda. This argument is extended in the 'third dimensional' account of power in which potential conflicts are minimized following the manipulation of people's beliefs. Although policy areas may *appear* to be consensual (suggesting that we cannot observe winners and losers in 'key decisions'), this is because some actors do not recognize their 'real interests' and act accordingly.

Other accounts go one step further, to argue that power relations are even less observable because they are manifest in self-regulation, everyday language, and assessments of knowledge claims. We can use critical theory to (a) identify and explain the use of language to dominate, dismiss, and maintain fear, (b) and seek ways to challenge such power relations to address major systematic inequalities in politics and

policy. In that context, critical scholars may suggest that to insist on the measurement of such forms of power is to dismiss the argument and downplay the necessarily normative role of research in politics.

Such debates suggest that the most important and interesting issues of power may also be the most difficult to research and demonstrate. Although we 'know' such power exists we do not agree on how to identify and theorize it. Therefore, what starts as a dry and technical issue of methodology becomes an issue that goes to the heart of normative debate on who possesses, and should possess, the means to exercise power. They also highlight the role of structure and agency. The exercise or effect of power relates to the resources of individuals, but they do not operate in a vacuum. They are surrounded by an audience more important than them. They engage with institutions and systems – representing the rules, beliefs, and actions of many others – that amplify or undermine the impact of their actions. Indeed, ideas often resemble structures, as the dominant ideologies that restrict debate and the rules of policymaking that limit popular participation and expression of meaningful consent.

As the remaining chapters suggest, these issues of theory, method and evidence are addressed well by theories of public policy. However, in analysing *approaches* individually, it is easy to lose sight of the issues raised when we focus directly on *themes* such as power and inequality. Studies of key actors – such as 'policy entrepreneurs' – may connect their success too much to individual skill rather than the nature of the policymaking environment that gives more opportunities to some people. Or, studies of systems may focus more on complexity, unpredictability, and minimal central control, than the endurance of major inequalities within complex systems. Therefore, the more critical reader should note the specific language of each policy theory *and* the power-based context in which we can understand them as a whole.