



# **POWER/GENDER**

Social Relations in Theory  
and Practice



EDITED BY

**H. LORRAINE RADTKE**  
and **HENDERIKUS J. STAM**

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## POWER/GENDER

## INQUIRIES IN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

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## Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Notes on Contributors	viii
1 Introduction <i>H. Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam</i>	1
<b>PART I: FEMINIST THEORIZING OF POWER AND GENDER</b>	
2 Power/Sex <i>Marilyn French</i>	15
3 Resistance: Lessons from Foucault and Feminism <i>Karlene Faith</i>	36
4 Into the Realm of the Fearful: Power, Identity and the Gender Problematic <i>Deborah Kerfoot and David Knights</i>	67
5 Female Powerlessness: a Case of 'Cultural Preparedness'? <i>Hilary M. Lips</i>	89
6 The Existential Bases of Power Relationships: the Gender Role Case <i>Jean Lipman-Blumen</i>	108
<b>PART II: THE STATE, POLITICS AND GENDER</b>	
7 The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal <i>R.W. Connell</i>	136
8 Notes toward a Political Theory of Sex and Power <i>Jill Vickers</i>	174

PART III: POWER AND THE SOCIAL  
CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

- 9 Problematizing Pleasure: Radical Feminist  
Deconstructions of Sexuality and Power 194  
*Celia Kitzinger*
- 10 Post-modernizing Gender: from Adrienne Rich to  
Judith Butler 210  
*Lorraine Weir*

PART IV: STUDIES IN THE PRACTICE OF  
POWER AND GENDER

- 11 Over Dinner: Feminism and Adolescent Female  
Bodies 219  
*Michelle Fine and Pat Macpherson*
- 12 Separation, Integration and Difference:  
Contradictions in a Gender Regime 247  
*Wendy Hollway*
- 13 Women in Women's Organizations: Power or  
*Pouvoir?* 270  
*Eliane Leslau Silverman*
- 14 On Oppressing Hypotheses: or Differences in  
Nonverbal Sensitivity Revisited 287  
*Marianne LaFrance and Nancy M. Henley*
- Index 312

## Introduction

*H. Lorraine Radtke and Henderikus J. Stam*

Power and gender are terms so commonly conjoined that their combined invocation has almost ceased to be indexical. Feminism initially alerted us to the fact that gender inequality is not natural, that women speak from unique worlds, and that their gender is (at least to a large extent) a cultural incarnation. Power is both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use.

But as there are many and varied voices within feminism, so there are multiple contexts for the use of power. Is power a thing/property/attribute to be feared/used? Is power inherent in social structures, language, bodies, relationships? Is it the very foundation of social life or, at the least, emergent from those foundations?

Without seeking a univocal solution, we believe that it still matters how we come to engage in discourses of power. If power is not to be viewed as an entity, as so many analyses of a post-Foucauldian nature proclaim, then how do we obtain it? And if it is so diffuse as to be inscribed on our very lives, our bodies, at every turn, then how do we know we have it?

These are questions which seek not answers but possibilities. And while it is difficult not to discuss forms of power in questions of gender, it still matters in the practice of changing social life how we conceive of power. Rather than solutions there are emerging dialogues and an engagement between authors who adhere to one or another version of the notion of power. Hence our not very subtle paraphrase of Foucault's problematic into one of power/gender. For feminists it is not only knowledge that is required for the diffusion and understanding of power – it is the realization of an embodied, gendered life. Power is inscribed in the rituals and practices of gender yet it is both more or less than gender. It is more in so far as these practices can be deliberately refused as well as explored. It is less because gender is not always and only a social practice. In the discussions of power and gender

## 2 *Power/Gender*

which make up this volume, both terms are thoroughly evaluated and revitalized.

The multifaceted problems raised by power are explored here from multiple angles, positions, practices and disciplines. Yet, none of our authors is unaware of the lived practices to which their analyses must eventually turn. Premature foreclosure on the question of power and gender would be foolhardy just as endless evocation is debilitating. But let the reader decide.

In what follows we would like to frame the text by raising major elements of the discussions in this volume. Given the multidisciplinary nature of the collection, we will begin with the problematic nature of the notion of power and then discuss how our authors bring their views of power to bear on the conceptions, problems, cases and analyses of gender.

### **The Definition of Power**

How then to conceive of a term which has been labelled 'essentially contested' (Lukes, 1974)? Authors in the social sciences often argue a 'best' definition of the term relying on different criteria for evaluating various meanings. This comparative process resists the label 'objective'; rather, the many definitions of power may be seen to reflect varying moral and political assumptions. Much of the concern in the literature on power has been to identify and analyse the implications of conceptualizations of power. What practices flow from these conceptions? How does one oppose unjust power? How does one exercise power if one is marginalized and oppressed? What is the personal/social/political basis of power? What are the limits of power? Theorists of power have recognized the relevance of these definitional matters for questions of human agency and justice within the complexity of social structures which presumably have been created to serve human needs and interests.

It was Foucault who alerted us to the economic or essentialist base of traditional conceptions of power. Power, like an entity, may be ceded from one person to another and may be acquired by virtue of one's position within a social hierarchy or through sheer brute force. Analyses based on this traditional model focus primarily on access to resources and strategies of influence, and frequently an underlying liberal philosophy in such accounts requires that power be one of the essential characteristics of individuals. Exemplars of this traditional view, three of which are illustrated here, can be found throughout the social sciences.

One such view which has commanded considerable influence within psychology is McClelland's notion of the power motive, the

goal of which is to feel powerful and to act powerfully. The thrust of McClelland's research is to find out 'what goes on in a person's head when the power motive is present' (1975: 6) and to examine the implications of this internal state for behaviour. The emphasis is intrapersonal and endogenous. The expression of the motive is linked to ego development, enabling McClelland to classify American males (the object of his studies) according to their type of power orientation. Thus, power is construed as an entity that can be categorized/known and delimited to individual motives.

Within sociology, Blau has defined power as the 'ability of persons or groups to impose their will on others despite resistance through deterrence either in the form of withholding regularly supplied rewards or in the form of punishment, inasmuch as the former as well as the latter constitute, in effect, a negative sanction' (1964: 117). The exercise of power is then placed within the context of social exchange theory, and therefore at its most fundamental level involves independent individuals whose actions are motivated by the returns expected from others. Such models of power are classified by Lukes (1974) as 'behavioural'.

Our third example comes from the economist Kenneth Boulding, who defined power in its broadest sense as 'a potential for change' (1989: 15). Superficially this definition appears to undo the narrow economic or behavioural metaphors which dominate the social sciences, yet at the level of the individual Boulding sees power simply as 'the ability to get what one wants' (1989: 15). A threefold classification of power follows and includes the stick (threat power), the carrot (economic power) and the hug (integrative power). These are in turn related to the power to destroy, the power to produce and exchange, and the power to create relationships. Whatever the merits of this assessment (and there are several which we cannot elaborate on here), power itself is associated with individuals and their personal resources.

Power has also been construed as a relational entity that is diverse and active. It is not only the possession of an individual but a process occurring within relationships between individuals. For example, Bachrach and Baratz (1970) describe a power relationship as one which exists when there is a conflict of values or course of action between two people, and one person complies with the other's wishes out of fear of deprivation of the values or things valued. Although this is still relatively individualistic, Bachrach and Baratz (1970) argued that non-decision-making or inaction also constitutes an exercise of power. Lukes, pursuing this line, includes the role of social structures ('collective forces and social arrangements', 1974: 22) in controlling the political agenda

#### 4 *Power/Gender*

and the consequences of this for one's 'real' interests. Moving away from the individualistic, voluntaristic assumptions embedded in most theories of power, he sought to emphasize the role of social structures in creating subjective interests. Power and responsibility are intimately linked for Lukes. He argues that power is exercised only when the individual or group exercising power can be held responsible for the consequences. When no attributions of responsibility can be made, the outcomes are attributed to 'fate'. Although these points of view were early attempts to move away from traditional, positivist-bound economic views of power they retain certain characteristics of that model. In particular, conflicts of interest continue to be seen as essential components of the exercise of power (Hartsock, 1985). The more radical move to alternative conceptions of power would follow the appearance of post-modernism and feminism which hastened the 'death of the subject'.

While the Foucauldian legacy is undergoing something of a re-evaluation in the social sciences, his studies of the regimes of power/knowledge have had a profound impact on the way we have come to view power. Foucault identifies a non-economic form of power which is closely related to epistemic concerns and subjectivity:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate through its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (1980: 98)

The important insight here is that the exercise of such power requires no external surveillance or coercion; rather, because the individual is constituted through power, the exercise of power can occur through a process of self-discipline or self-regulation. Moreover, the exercise of power is implicated in the mechanisms and procedures for producing knowledge, and hence, in knowledge itself. Consequently, all social practices are shaped by power, including, at least according to some authors, the reproduction of traditional gender arrangements.

Feminist authors engaged in rethinking the utility of traditional concepts of power have reacted to Foucault's understanding of power in diverse ways, reflecting their concern with the nature of



patriarchal forms of power, their use and abuse, and the need to revise and rethink power so that it serves an emancipatory role in the lives of women. Robin Morgan makes the point succinctly:

Patriarchal power . . . requires the monopolizing of power, which in turn requires the monodefining of power as a static and singular object, the better to monopolize it. Fluid, multiple powers cannot be employed to such an end because they are not so controllable, because the more powers there exist, the more likely they are to be distributed via many vehicles and channels . . . Recognizing these qualities of power/powers is a political act. (1989: 325)

Analysing power is akin to understanding the deep meaning of patriarchy; feminism has by its very nature grappled with the politics, the practice and the experience of power. Gender is inextricably bound to questions of power and through their conjunction the understanding of both has been deeply transformed, although the evaluation of that transformation remains for feminists a contentious topic (for example Fraser, 1989; Sawicki, 1991). It is our hope that this volume captures a broad cross-section of these transformations.

## Gender and Power

The power dynamics inherent in traditional conceptualizations of gender was theorized in the writings of those who noted that 'difference' was often equated with women's subordination or inadequacy (see Davis, 1988; Grosz, 1990, for summaries). Ironically, those most interested in gender have had to rely largely on theories of power which were not specifically developed to account for female-male power relations. Indeed, in some cases, the theorists of power appear to be blind to women's experience (for example, see Grosz's (1990) discussion of the ideas of Althusser, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida). As a consequence, the application of theories of power to research problems focused on gender has been problematic, requiring a cautious and critical approach (for example, the papers in the collection edited by Davis et al., 1991). The meaning of power has undergone considerable analysis by those who wish specifically to include women's experience within its scope. It is these developments that make up the core of this section of the book.

The chapters in the first section of this volume are devoted to the project of theorizing power in a way that can do justice to gender relations. Two of these draw on Foucault, who remained ambivalent about the uniqueness of gendered power relations.