

Power and power relations

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Power is probably **one of the most ambiguous and vague terms** in social science. In my understanding, power is **an omnipresent element** of social reality (Foucault, 1990) that determines organisation of social interactions among policy actors in particular institutional settings. Following Latour (1984), Whitehead (2010), and Arendt (2013), whose work on power helps to conceptualise it more individually, I am focused on (i) the perception of **power differentials** such as force, authority, influence, knowledge, or control of resources that leads to (ii) localisation of what has been constructed as “a power of someone” in social interactions.

To be more precise, I am focused on **an interpersonal level** where power manifests itself in **relationships among people**. In that sense, Arendt (2013) describes power as a ubiquitous power potential that springs up when people interact. In that sense, power is a situational, relational, changeable, and unreliable entity – a potential, potency, or capacity – helping overcome significant obstacles in a particular context.

As such, **power cannot be possessed**. Power is – not permanently – **negotiated, given, and taken in social interaction** among people.

Definition of the power of social workers:

Power is a situational, relational, changeable, and unreliable potency or capacity of social workers to promote desired changes (or prevent unwanted changes).

Power relations can be seen as a **competition among constructions of power** based on a **perception of power symbols**. The other is situationally seen as powerful **when (and only when) one acknowledges their potential capacity to do something**. In interactions, power is exhibited **through particular symbols** such as a muscular figure, a gun, a suit, a title or degree, an articulacy, or wealth. Given the uneven distribution of power among actors, power relations are characterised by an asymmetry in the perceived potential capacity among actors. **When the other is perceived as powerful, then they become endowed with power.**

