



An Introduction to Social Psychology

Power Relations

Ann Phoenix:

Power relations are everywhere. So every time we interact with somebody else, power relations are apparent in the interactions. Doesn't mean that the people interacting are conscious of those power relations, but they, they are evident if you analyse the interactions. And so power relations are also evident at a broader social level, societal level. So that one can think about everybody being positioned within society in relation to power, and those relations shifting.

Wendy S-Rogers:

Power permeates everything. It permeates everything that we do. I think it permeates every relationship we have with somebody else. There are these complex networks of power going on. And also that the power is not necessarily, surely, a good thing or a bad thing, there's nothing inherently good or bad in power, it's what you do with it and what it's, what the effect of exercising power is.

Ann Phoenix:

In a research project that I'm doing together with Wendy Hollway and with Heather Elliott on the transition to motherhood, we find that some of the women talk about how willing their husbands are to help with childcare, and that they have to be the ones that wake their husbands up to change the nappy or to do the feed. So it means that they never get a clear night's sleep, because even if it's not their turn, say at the weekend, when their husbands are around, they have to take responsibility for, for waking up and so on, and they very much see it as helping rather than being in full time partnership. Now what's power relations got to do with that? Well if we think about the notion of power relations, we can see that that situation comes to be taken for granted as natural, as normal, to be reproduced in many households because there are already differential power relations in society.

Mother:

Where's mummy going? Where's mummy going?

Wendy Hollway:

We're not talking about the kind of power relations that are forms of domination, just negative oppression, monolithic. We're talking about power relations as ongoing processes that can have positive as well as negative effects. Micro power. It flows in all directions, in many different ways and therefore has an almost an infinity of different effects.

Ann Phoenix:

Power is relational in that in different context, different people can actually take power, so that it is shifting. And what I mean by that is for example, take parents and children. Now parents undoubtedly tend to have more power than do their children, but there are situations in which children switch that. In for example, public, children will sometimes know that their parents can't shout at them and that they can get back at their, their parents by doing certain things, within certain limits maybe, by doing certain things that their parents can't retaliate about. Or, that they can say something about their parents that will make their parents feel excruciatingly embarrassed. So they have a lot of power in that situation.

It's contextual, it's situated, it's not everywhere and at all times, but it means that power is not absolute.