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RELEVANCE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH IN UNDERSTANDING POWER: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Power – the essence of all social and political interaction, that dirty, manipulative device, the latent force, the bottomless swamp, the essence of management process and the symbol of success – has, for several years caught the attention of organizational researchers. Several books discussing solely the topic of power have appeared in the academic (*e.g.* Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981) and popular (*e.g.* Harragan, 1977; Korda, 1975) press in the last decade alone. Some writers have suggested that every instance of social interaction and relationship involves an exercise of power (*e.g.* Astley and Sachdeva, 1984) and every social act is 'an exercise of power, every social relationship . . . a power equation and every social group of system . . . an organization of power' (Hawley, 1963, p. 422).

Despite this, the concept of power has not been fully understood. March (1966), referring to the pervasiveness of the concept of power, asserted that the concept of power has become almost a tautology – a concept used to explain that which cannot be explained by other constructs and ideas and incapable of being falsified as an explanation for individual and social actions. Nor is there any great degree of agreement among social scientists as to what precisely constitutes power. As Cartwright (1959, pp. 185–6) noted, most authors have taken pains to provide a definition but each felt compelled to invent one of his own. The consequence is that a wide variety of definitions exist. For example, Bierstedt (1950, p. 738) looked at power as hidden and as a 'latent force . . . power itself is the prior capacity which makes the application of force possible'. Others like Blau (1964) and Dahl (1957, pp. 202–3) have focused on the more manifest nature of the phenomenon, the latter defining power of person A over person B as 'the extent to which he can get B to do something that he would not otherwise do'. Also, writers such as Dahl have primarily studied power at the individual level, while others such as Salancik and Pfeffer (1977) and Parsons (1960) have studied power mostly at the organizational level. For example, to Parsons, power is the realistic capacity of a system unit to actualize its interests within the context of system interaction and in this sense exert influence on processes in the system to attain specific goals. To French and Raven (1968), identifying the basis of power was important in understanding its occurrence and usage; to Weber (1947, p. 47), on the other

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hand, the emergent outcomes assume greater importance, power being 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will, despite resistance, and regardless of the basis on which this probability rests'.

Power has remained an inchoate and 'messy' concept (March, 1966) of organizational life, a concept that is 'problematic... and troublesome to the socialization of managers and the practice of management because of its implications and connotations' (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 2). Though a 'fundamental concept in social science' (Russell, 1938, p. 12), power remains as an elusive and controversial phenomenon often confused with other constructs such as force, persuasion, influence, appeal, identification, authority, coercion and inducement.

Much of this confusion may be on account of the multidimensional nature of the construct of power – which possesses visible, apparent and hidden characteristics simultaneously. Teasing out the interrelations among these characteristics may often be difficult (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984; McClelland, 1975). Power orientations of an individual can also be different depending on the source (*i.e.* 'self' *versus* the 'other') and object ('self' or 'other') of power (McClelland, 1975). To McClelland, the power orientations of managers or scientists are totally different from those of psychologists or collectors. This is because, the former group's source and object of power are 'others' whereas the psychologists and collectors have a 'self' orientation on both these dimensions. These differing orientations make the task of the researchers even more complex.

NATURE OF PAST RESEARCH ON POWER

Much of the past research on power has focused on concepts such as centralization, standardization and formalization (*e.g.* Beyer, 1982; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974) or other structural aspects of power including the organizational hierarchy (*e.g.* Astley and Sachdeva, 1984). Several other writers have taken modified structural-functional approaches to studying power (*e.g.* Merton, 1963; Parsons and Shils, 1951) while a few have looked at coalition formation as the basis of emergence of powerful groups: included here are Caplow's (1968) power theory of coalitions, Komorita and Chertkoff's (1973) bargaining theory, Gamson's (1961) resource theory and Bacharach and Lawler's (1980) work on power. Emerson's (1962) notion of power as the obverse of dependency is also reflected in other social exchange models of power (*e.g.* Beyer, 1982; Blau, 1964; Hickson, *et al.*, 1971; Homans, 1974; Jacobs, 1974; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1974). Power in organizations is conceptualized by these writers as emerging from the dependencies that exist among organizational actors.

The notion that the drive for power is innate in human beings was visible in Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*. Russell (1975, p. 8) observed that 'of the infinite desires of man, the chief are the desires for power and glory', thus emphasizing power as an integral part of human nature. Psychologists and psychoanalysts moving in the same direction have asserted that power is a basic and compensatory motive of human beings (*e.g.* Adler, 1924). Horney (1964, p. 163), attempting to distinguish between normal and neurotic strivings for power suggested that the normal striving is based on an individual's realization

of 'his own superior strength' whereas neurotic striving is 'born out of anxiety, hatred and feelings of inferiority'. Freud (1905), and later Kets de Vries (1980) have suggested a psychological developmental theory of power thus relating the individual's need for power to the human development process and adaptation to environment. Kets de Vries further proposed that during each stage of human development the individual also had to deal with three aspects of intrapersonal power (which he called oceanic power, controlling power and rivalrous power).

In a more recent work, Mintzberg (1983) described the various political games by organizational members to gain power internally. Some of the games discussed by Mintzberg are: insurgency games (usually played to resist authority), sponsorship, alliance-building, empire-building and budgeting games (to build power bases), rival camps games (to defeat rivals) and whistle-blowing and Young Turks games (to bring about organizational change). Mintzberg's intent was to provide a conceptual framework to the understanding of the structure and system of games. His work also examined the effect of games on the legitimate power within organizations and the structure of internal coalitions. However, this political view of acquisition and use of power is of more recent origin. Many of the earlier studies had looked at power from an essentially rational–structural point of view. A large number of writers have also attempted to analyse the phenomenon of power from an individual or organizational point of view.

EMERGING ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF POWER

As mentioned above, many past studies on power have focused on static organizational constructs (*e.g.* centralization) or hierarchical distribution of authority. For example, Weber (1947) emphasized acquiring an understanding (or *verstehen*) of social action and a causal explanation of the same doing 'little or no direct observation of human actions. His intellectual problems were derived from broad historical situations. . .predominantly dealing with past events. . .[with] no possibility for direct observation' (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979, p. 19). The 'rationalist' and positivistic approaches to understanding power were characterized by 'quantification of relevant data, use of formal decision procedures and the utilization of empirical laws; all of these are combined to form an attitude of abstraction from the traditional, qualitative and historically unique features of a situation in order to settle the question at hand "objectively"' (Fay, 1975, p. 14). In recent years, there has been a growing realization of the limitations of quantitative and 'objective' approaches in understanding complex organizational and social phenomena. Surveys and one-shot experimentation may often be inadequate in validly assessing and explaining organizational phenomena (Das, 1983). Selection of variables may be done haphazardly, often, 'on the basis of a specious impression of what is important, on the basis of conventional usage, on the basis of what can be secured through a given instrument or technique, on the basis of the demands of some doctrine, or on the basis of an imaginative ingenuity in devising a new term' (Blumer, 1967, p. 84). Added to this are other problems caused by absence of generic variables (or variables that stand for abstract categories), leading to a focus on 'here and now' relationships among variables. In many instances, the researcher's assumptions about the universe are mechanistic,

leading to an emphasis on achieving uniformity in method of enquiry (Silverman, 1972). This has led to an emphasis on choice of 'clear cut unitary variables which will lend themselves to complex statistical analysis; giveness has replaced process – except where that process is imposed on the material by an observer (for instance, by inferring a process from the results of two questionnaires offered to the same respondents at different times)' (Silverman, 1972; pp. 185–6). The result is that 'the overwhelming bulk of what passes. . . as methodology is made up of. . . preoccupations as. . . the devising and use of sophisticated research techniques, usually of advanced statistical character, the construction of logical and mathematical models, all too frequently guided by a criterion of elegance. . . and the promotion of a particular procedure, such as survey research, as *the* method of scientific study' (Blumer, 1969, pp. 26–7).

In the study of power, the impact of the methodology has been marked, to say the least. 'Interpretive differences are frequently discussed as misrepresentations of the empirical reality rather than being viewed as consequences of different constructs or approaches to power' (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980, p. 11). Thus, empirically oriented researchers and the theoreticians (on power) have different notions of power. The positivist bias evident in research on power also had the effect of reifying social institutions. '"Reification" means "making into a thing", and it refers to the tendency of taking what are essentially conventional activities and treating them as if they were natural entities which have a separate existence of their own, and which operate according to a given set of laws independently of the wishes of the social actors who engage in them' (Fay, 1975, pp. 58–9). This reification has distracted attention from the intraorganizational dynamics including organizational politics (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). Caplow's (1968) and Gamson's (1961) writings on power apply primarily to static situations as they do not make sufficient provision for coalition dynamics over time, coalition size and ideological compatibility of the parties involved (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). Nor can we, according to Kuhn (1964) infer motives of individuals from their overt behaviours – yet this seems to be common in many of the past research studies on power. Indeed, the implicit structure and meaning of many human experiences cannot be revealed by simple observations. A more in-depth and phenomenological study of the experiences (or consciousness) may be needed in the case of studies of complex phenomena.

SYMBOLS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL PHENOMENA

Since the late 1970s, a large number of articles and books have appeared in the organizational behaviour and management area emphasizing the usefulness of organizational symbols and cultural artefacts in understanding complex phenomena (*e.g.* Dandridge, 1983; Dandridge, Mitroff and Joyce, 1980; Das, 1987; Frost, Mitchell and Nord, 1978; Kanter and Stein, 1979; Kilmann *et al.*, 1986; Mitroff and Kilmann, 1976; Pondy *et al.*, 1983; Stablein and Nord, 1985). The summer 1985 issue of *Journal of Management* was focusing solely on 'Organizational Symbolism' while an increasing number of articles in other management journals have, in recent years, been highlighting the relevance of symbols in efforts

to understand, measure and predict organizational phenomena. Symbols such as stories, myths, rites, rituals, ceremonies, special languages, metaphors and logos have been found to play specific roles in maintaining, communicating and modifying organizational culture. There is a relatively high degree of consensus among scholars and management practitioners today that organizational culture, values and artefacts play a critical role in shaping management decisions (*e.g.* Sapienza, 1986). Culture may also be a basis for control (Ouchi, 1981) and maintaining continuity of the focal organization.

Organizational symbols serve a variety of functions. Dandridge (1983) categorized the major functions of symbols into descriptive, energy controlling and system-maintaining. To questions such as 'What's this organization like? How are the bosses in this place?', a member may be able to respond in a string of adjectives, or using stories or myths about the behaviours of past executives. Symbols such as stories, myths and metaphors place explanation beyond doubt and arguments, and hence are perhaps the most effective way of describing a phenomenon (Pondy, 1983). Symbols can also bridge the familiar to the unfamiliar, thus facilitating change on the part of members and deepening 'the meaning or values of the organization by giving them expression in novel situations' (Pondy, 1983, p. 164) – something that traditional, objective–positivist research methodology is typically unable to uncover. The unique language of an organization (including its unique terminologies, codes, acronyms, signs, metaphors and other symbols) convey more validly the culture of an organization (Evered, 1983) than standard questionnaires or interview checklists while organizational stories are able to present and resolve inherent contradictions in social systems (Levi-Strauss, 1963). Thus, the same manager may be both powerful and powerless in very similar situations – something that a typical questionnaire is unable to measure reliably. Wilkins (1978, 1983) and Wilkins and Martin (1979) have argued that developing literature on cognitive scripts of organizations and its members help us to understand organizational phenomena better. This is because scripts help us to 'categorize events of "this type" so that we know what to expect and/or how to behave' (Wilkins 1983, pp. 83–4).

Peters (1978) has argued that top management has relatively little control over major organizational changes including structural rearrangements or initiating new strategic planning systems. His study of successful executives led him to conclude that, typically, changes and influence attempts are achieved through symbols and symbolic actions. Some of the symbolic actions he mentioned include: changing the setting, changing the amount of time spent on an activity (that is to be emphasized), offering new interpretations of history and use of simple and commonplace expressions and phrases to express a dominant value. Indeed, Pfeffer (1981, p. 5) defined the task of management in terms of 'rationalizing and legitimizing actions' often through symbolic acts. According to Pfeffer (1981, p. 32), 'symbolic responses may be desirable because that is all those in contact with the organization really desire, or because of limited time and information, they are unwilling or incapable of discerning symbol from substance' – in any case, symbolizing acts outweighing in usage and value over established decision rules and criteria formal plans and objectively measurable variables.

A symbolic approach to the study of organization, thus, attempts to study the phenomena within the cultural context it occurs. Smircich (1983, p. 353) observed that 'by using culture as a root metaphor, they are all influenced to consider organization as a particular form of human expression . . . when culture is a root metaphor, the researcher's attention shifts from concerns about what do organizations accomplish and how may they accomplish it more effectively, to how is organization accomplished and what does it mean to be organized?' Such a focus on the creation of meaning is likely to recognize the conflicting preferences and interpretations of a phenomenon such as power. Above all, it will help in uncovering why some preferences and actions were institutionalized over others (Stablein and Nord, 1985). This becomes particularly vital, as many facets and routines of an organization may be embedded in unconscious rituals and patterns of behaviour – something that standardized research inquiries may be unable to decipher, yet play a critical role in shaping organizational performance.

A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF POWER

Symbols and symbolism in an organization can be studied on the basis of a number of paradigms including the functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist or radical structuralist modes (Morgan, Frost and Pondy, 1983). This article primarily takes a functionalist, interpretive and phenomenological view of symbolism viewing symbols as carriers of information and meaning and the medium through which individuals create and interpret their world. Thus actions are conceptualized to possess symbolic meaning in most (if not all) occasions. In this sense, the present view is more in line with the symbolic interactionist perspective of Herbert Blumer and Charles Cooley.[2] Contemporary symbolic interactionism encompasses diverse schools of thought including 'unorthodox' groups (favouring participant observation), 'semi-conventional' groups (favouring positivism), and 'conventional' groups (favouring a combination of methods) (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975). Warshay (1971) identified the following specific typologies of interactionist approach:

> (1) The Blumer School emphasizing the more subjective aspects . . . ; (2) the Iowa School, stressing self theory and a positivistic methodology . . . ; (3) an emphasis on interaction with deemphasis on language . . . ; (4) a role theory view with a cognitive emphasis within a moderate scientific tradition . . . ; (5) the 'dramaturgical' school featuring the intricacies of role and self manipulation; (6) a field theory version combining Mead, Lewin and Lundberg . . . ; (7) an existential brand . . . ; (8) ethnomethodology stressing the complexity and fluidity of the web of social life with a humanist–participatory methodology.

Even though the perspectives of these schools are different, there are three basic premises underlying all symbolic interactionist approaches (Blumer, 1969, p. 2);

> The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them . . . the second premise is that the

> meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters...

Symbolic interactionism recognizes social interaction to be of utmost importance since it forms human conduct. Individuals interacting with one another have to take into account what each is doing or is planning to do. Thus, each individual has to fit his own line of activity to the actions of others relevant to him. Human beings construct their realities out of interaction with other individuals; hence, the methodological necessity of 'getting inside' the reality of the actor in an effort to understand the reality as the actor sees it (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975).

> Instead of the traditional question, 'Is a tree there if there is no individual to see and experience it as a tree?' Blumer asks, 'Do trees exist as such without social groups who invent, teach and use the concept of tree in diverse social situations?' From groups of interacting individuals come the social processes that produce meanings. In turn, from meanings are produced the realities that constitute the 'real world' within which the individuals or groups spend their lives. Finally, it is this socially constituted 'real world' that serves as the basis of an individual's actions (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; p. 25).

Thus the world an individual lives and interacts with – the 'real world' – is real in its consequences. While social action may possess antecedent causes and consequences, these by themselves do not constitute such actions. To understand the process of social action, one has to understand the differing interpretations of the reality of the involved persons.

The symbolic interactionism model asserts that 'human interaction is a process of sharing one another's behaviour rather than of merely responding to each other's worlds and actions' (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1975; p. 82). Since the social whole is to some degree dependent on each individual, it does not make any sense to separate individual and society surrounding the person (Cooley, 1967). The concern here is with both the inner or phenomenological aspects of human behaviour and visible symbols, rituals and behaviours of social interaction. It is believed that a symbolic interactionist approach to the study of power will enrich our knowledge of the phenomenon besides helping to avoid some of the pitfalls of objective, positivistic and rigorous research.

For most symbols, their meaning is established through an external tie between the referent and a sign vehicle. Hence sharing a language with another person provides a subtle and powerful way to control the other's behaviour (Morris, 1949). Edelman (1964) saw language as a critical tool in the political control process and suggested that the stylistic elements (of the language used) such as commands, definitions, statements or premises, inferences, conclusions and forms of expression as critical to understanding the power play at work. Edelman suggested four major styles of language (hortatory, legal, administrative and bargaining) which are bound to be of interest to the researcher in the area. To Edelman, language is an important substitute for the use of brute force in

attempting to control another's behaviour; often political speeches being simple rituals 'dulling the critical faculties rather than awakening them' (p. 124).

In all cases, however, the effect of a message is the change which it produces in the image of the recipient. Sometimes, simple administrative strategies may be used to create this image and improve the power position. As Gibb (1976, p. 112) pointed out:

> Strategies are devised to improve the administrative image: a worker's name is remembered to make him feel good; a birthday file is kept to demonstrate that the administrator feels the subordinate is important enough to warrant a birthday card. The 'good' administrator is especially careful to smile acceptingly at those members of the 'family' teams towards whom he has temporary or sustained feelings of animosity. . .

Often messages may also be 'corrected' (by consciously or unconsciously filtering them) to present a good image, to encourage positive thinking, to increase morale or to build loyalty (Gibb, 1976). This is consistent with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to the study of social interaction.

The intent here is not to suggest that communication aimed at restructuring power status is always verbal. Indeed, Mehrabian's (1968) early research shows that only some seven per cent of the communication happens verbally. Lewis (1975, p. 153) provides a classification of the major non-verbal communication tools including paralanguage, olfaction, and body motion. The manner in which a person converses with another carries the silent message of who is in command. Parlee (1979) found that interruptions, long pauses, abrupt shifts in conversational topic, the sequence of speaking – among other things – are used to show who is in command of the situation.

In sum, language and communication which create meaning may be thought of as one of the basic tools used by the powerful (or potentially powerful) to dominate the other(s). Myths, legends, jokes, rumours, data, stories and details of other rituals are verbally conveyed to influence the others. The symbolic meaning of specific referents however do not remain static. As Werner and Kaplan (1967) pointed out, the tie between vehicle and the referent rests on an 'organismic process of schematization' – that is, 'the sign vehicle becomes transformed into the overt face of a symbolic vehicle and the reference into a connotatively defined referent' (p. 29). This also accounts for the lapse of meaning of different linguistic forms – a word when uttered in continuous repetition begins to sound or look strange and lose its status as a meaningful word (Werner and Kaplan, 1967).

A suggested approach to the study of power by looking at the process of establishing the meaning (of events, acts and objects) is shown in figure 1. In suggesting a symbolic interactionist approach to the study of power, it is realized that the various symbols within an organization are not alike. Some of the symbols used in an organization are interpretable primarily at the level of groups (or two or more members) – hence, these can be usefully thought of as 'intersubjective' in nature. Some other symbols are interpretable and meaningful primarily at the individual level. For convenience sake, these are referred to as 'intra-subjective' symbols. Stories, language and rites (at least many of them)

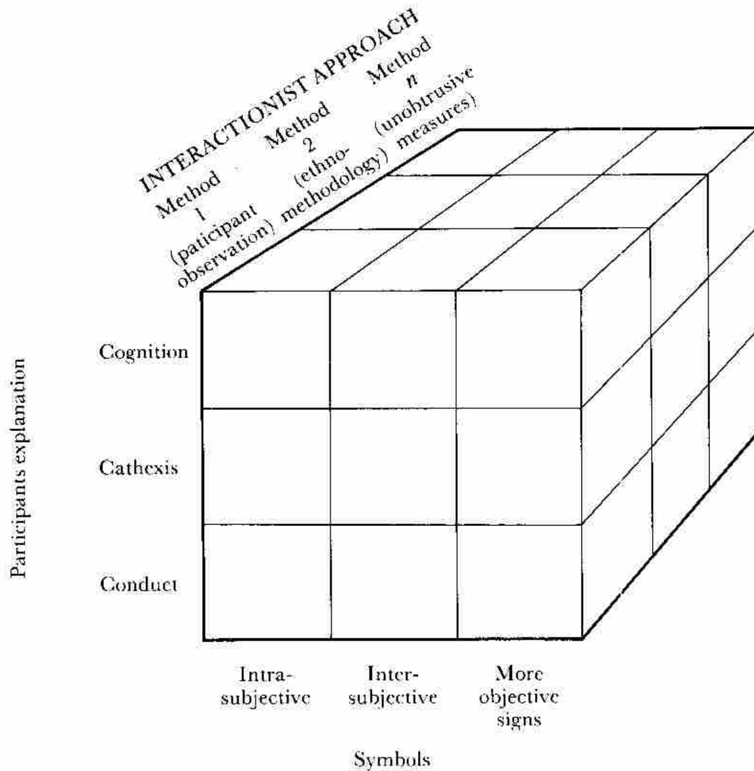

Figure 1. A suggested symbolic interactionist approach to the study of power

belong to the inter-subjective category while gifts, letters from top management and special privileges received may be more appropriately placed under the latter category.

Symbols should also be distinguished from signs which merely represent other constructs or or phenomena. Symbols, in contrast, are invested with a subjective meaning relevant to a specific culture or a particular individual. Thus, all symbols are signs, but the reverse is not true. Signs may be referred to as 'objective' indices we have been using in organizational indices as the key measure – at least, until recently.

In understanding power within organizations, inter-subjective and intra-subjective symbols as well as signs are likely to be of considerable assistance. The inter-subjective symbols are closer in meaning and connotation to the 'instrumental' symbols suggested by Daft (1983) while intra-subjective symbols are most abstract and may not be easily discernible except through detailed investigation and intense interaction with the individuals involved. The intra-subjective symbols are also more likely to fall into the unconscious category – hence, standardized investigation methods may not be successful in identifying them. It should also be noted that in many instances, the separation of signs from symbols may be difficult – what a person considers as a mere sign may be a symbol (often at an unconscious level) to another. Consequently, these are more usefully thought of as the two ends of a continuum rather than discrete compartments.

Several symbols have multiple meanings and have multiple functions to serve. Thus, organizational stories may be used to facilitate recall, generate beliefs and/or encourage commitments on the part of organizational members (Wilkins, 1983). In a similar vein, language may perform multiple functions including generating an appropriate degree of abstraction and detachment, specifying the relation among organizational actors or facilitating evaluation of actions (Hirsch and Andrews, 1983). This poses major problems of interpretation to the researcher as well as the practitioner who wants to interpret and use symbols in understanding and controlling organizational phenomena. This is especially true of intra-subjective symbols whose meanings are attributed on the basis of the individual participant's background and beliefs.

One solution to the problem may be to use multiple research strategies to capture the richness of different symbols. Participant observation, ethnography, intensive case studies, use of unobtrusive measures, *etc.* are some of the research approaches that can be profitably combined.

Bruyn's (1966) suggestion of recording the participant's explanations of a phenomenon at different levels is also worth considering in this context. Bruyn suggested that in any social drama, the participant's explanations may be recorded at three levels:

Cognition. The researcher is concerned here with the question, 'How is meaning made intelligible?' The questions to ask may include: When did meaning arise? Where does it arise? Among what actors? Is it expressed in private? What language is being used? *etc.*

Cathexis. Here the researcher attempts to link the quality of feeling to meaning. Typical questions to ask include: When did sentiment arise? Do different roles lead to different sentiments? How are these sentiments conveyed? *etc.*

Conduct. At this level, the researcher attempts to understand the actions which accompanied meaning. Typical areas of enquiry could include: When did action arise? Where? Who were the actors? What actions conveyed the meaning? *etc.*

Bruyn argued that setting out with a series of questions such as these would help to achieve some degree of intersubjectivity among researchers on the phenomenon under investigation. Bruyn's emphasis was, however, on understanding the world as the participants saw it.

CONCLUSION

There is an emerging body of research supporting the usefulness of symbolic approach to the study of power. For example, through an interactionist mode, Travers (1982, pp. 281–2) was able to discover the ritual power (defined as 'the amount of "ritualness" a person has within interaction') of 'punks'.

> the hair, the dog collars, the bicycle chains, the safety pins in the face, the nose-studs, the earrings, and so on [of punks], all these doubly offend in that on their own they break accepted conventions of appearance and, in as much

> as they are flaunted, break a 'meta' convention that rule-breakers should effect immediate repair of the ritual *status quo*. Moreover, since the offences are not apologized for – but are revelled in – they add insult to insult showing no respect for the idea that respect should exist between punks and non-punks... By virtue of his organized orientations to current fashions of normalcy, the punk earns attributions to vileness that he knows perfectly well can actually go no deeper than his appearances. And this is how he boosts his ritual power. Instead of being lowered by the insults offered him at his behest, he can rise above them if he but maintain his poise and *sang froid*. ...therefore he has more ritual power than his denigrators...

In the same article, Travers show how professional nurses attain ritual power through socialization which emphasizes rigid regulations on dressing, cleanliness, and behaviour – in a direction contrary to the one taken by the punks. Yet, the idea is the same: by rigidly living up to the role expectations, both groups are attempting to attain ritual power over other interactants.

In an organizational context, ceremonies are often performed to mobilize support and acquire power. Gephart (1978) discussed the rituals involved in the replacement of an executive in a student organization. Several of the steps detailed by Gephart bear close resemblance to the actions taken in large commercial organizations when they are attempting to replace their executives. Sayles (1979) showed how 'anointing' and associating with powerful individuals can be used by ambitious leaders to gain status. The powerful individuals, according to Sayles, often manipulate the social distance with other individuals to maintain or improve power balance. This also facilitates control over information – yet another factor which seems to influence the power relationship.

That physical environments including physical structure, stimuli and artefacts may have a significant impact on a person's behaviour was pointed out by Steele (1973). The physical environments may thus signal or symbolize an individual's power. For example, the furniture and surroundings, the temperature, humidity and surrounding aesthetic artefacts are, typically, much more comfortable in the case of higher-status members of an organization. Edelman (1978) also suggested that the physical settings play an important role of reinforcing the existing nature of social order within organizations. Sperber (1974) also shows how symbolic mechanisms such as 'smells' (which do not have any semantic field or classification scheme) can evoke memories and trigger actions. Other symbols like colours, vibrations, tone, *etc.* also have non-insignificant impact on human behaviour.

Research by Koch (1984) describes how one unit in an organization resisted efforts toward reorganization. Seven key political strategies aimed at influencing other organizational actions were detailed by Kipnis and Schmidt (1983). These include reasoning, ingratiation, bargaining and sanctions – items which were not included in typical earlier studies on power. The increasingly popular area of organizational politics is also making use of organizational symbols and symbolic actions to understand and record organizational games and power transformations are 'intricate and subtle, simultaneous and overlapping' (Allison, 1971, p. 216) and in fact there may be no viable alternative to the symbolic approach in studying them.

In sum, the traditional, positivistic research tends to view organizations as reified entities whereas an interactionist approach may help to focus more on the processes within an organization. Symbolic interactionism primarily uses a micro-level approach – focusing on the individual's meanings and interactions with others. However, the approach is flexible enough to understand the individual's responses to organizations (which appear as macro-organisms or large social units to them). The symbolic interactionist does recognize the fact that social activities require co-ordination and control – yet, is able to realize that the existing relationship patterns are continually evolving.

The holistic standpoint of symbolic interactionist approach (which emphasizes the organic nature of human systems) makes it very appropriate to the study of power. Since 'the world is the actual grouplife of human beings – it consists of what they experience and do individually and collectively...' (Blumer, 1969, p. 35). Symbolic interactionist approach, thus, bypasses the debate of priority of social group over the individual and focuses on the social *act*.

> Social psychologists of one stripe have argued that society is *the* ultimate reality; social psychologists of another variety give ontological precedence to the individual, denying the reality of the society. Either position leads to confusion and contradiction... (Stryker, 1967, p. 373).

A symbolic interactionist on the other hand focuses on the *meaning* of symbols to the participants and their actual acts. As symbolic processing has at least two major aspects, namely focalization or displacement of attention and evocation and a search in the memory (Sperber, 1974), relations among parts of a pattern need not always be logical. An interactionist approach may help to identify the inherent contradictions in social systems. Since, 'unknown parts can not be logically deduced from known ones... [there is] continual stress on the developing, emergent character of human meaning and action' (Williams, 1976, p. 130).

Needless to emphasize, the model outlined in this paper is only one of the possible approaches in the study of power. However, it is believed that a symbolic interactionist approach would increase the understanding of power in specific ways:

(1) Power in organizations is vibrant and potent, yet abstract in character. Traditional measures of authority, reward power, *etc.* do not capture the richness or intensity of the construct. Often the cause–effect relationships involving power may be hidden or in any case not amenable to study any use of traditional measures. Ill-structured and ambiguous phenomena may require intuitive, experience-based measures for our understanding (Perrow, 1967; Thompson, 1967). This raises a dilemma; to be meaningful, the information that is collected has to be understood by at least a segment of the organizational participants; yet, the measures used have to accommodate the subjectivity, intuition and experience of individual members of the organization.

    Symbols provide a feasible solution in this context. They can vary in the level of abstraction to meet the needs of the participants and the situation. 'Expressive symbols may tend to operate at a high level of

abstraction, while instrumental symbols are more concrete and close to the phenomena communicated about' (Daft, 1983, p. 205). Thus, organizational stories can convey power in more abstract terms, while organization charts can communicate them in 'objective' or more concrete terms. Even a tangible object can assume the position of a symbol for expressive needs (*e.g.* a key to the executive washroom symbolizing the power of the occupant), but the phenomenon is still abstract and to a great extent intangible.

(2) The outside observers are more likely to reach a valid conclusion about the power of the role incumbent by looking at symbols rather than at 'objective' and rational measures (*e.g.* organization chart). For an outside observer, symbols can be a useful diagnostic tool which helps to understand inconsistencies and brings the core process to a level of consciousness (Dandridge, 1983). By using symbolic elements, interventions aimed at power equalization can match the existing organizational acts and level of abstraction. Indeed, a number of symbols can be used to bring about changes in organizations at structural, group and individual levels (Das, 1987). Knittel's (1974) description of the use of essential and nonessential rituals by a change agent and Abravanel's (1983) discussion on the use of mediating myths in reducing contradictions between components of organizational ideology are of interest in this context.

(3) For the manager, an understanding of symbols provides insight into the organization's value system and culture. This is of particular interest to the new entrant to the organization who has to gain, exercise and retain power over other relevant members and groups in a short time. Apart from making sense of the past and the present, symbols may also be a potent medium for directing future activity (Dandridge, 1983). Case histories of powerful leaders indicate a conscious effort on their part to nurture and use symbols in directing activity and justifying action. This appears to be true even in the case of social leaders (*e.g.* Hitler, Gandhi). In contrast, random use of symbols may cause confusion in the minds of organizational participants. The results may include lack of convergence in member behaviours and the absence of a core value system or organizational character that is necessary for producing superior performance. The use of symbols may play a critical role in controlling and directing member performance

This article is not an argument against quantitative or logical–positivistic approaches to the study of power. Rather, its aim is to emphasize the need for expanding current research paradigms to include qualitative approaches. The use of symbols and measures of organizational culture will not solve all the prevailing problems. Indeed, they may at times raise new issues. By their very nature, qualitative methodology collects subjective opinions, attitudes, impressions and information – the methodology employed in most instances is also, therefore, subjective and judgemental. Unless the researcher is careful, it might turn out that the 'earthy' and 'serendipitous' conclusions are in fact wrong (Miles, 1979). Combining different methodologies, research paradigms and efforts may help us to avoid some of these pitfalls and refine our approach. For

the present, however, the symbolic interactionist perspective does seem to offer a potentially rich area for exploration, especially in the context of organizational power.

NOTES

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Organizational Symbolism and Corporate Culture, University of Lund, Sweden, 26–30 June, 1984.

[2] Several other scholars including George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, W. I. Thomas, M. H. Kuhn, and H. Garfinkel have contributed to the intellectual foundation of symbolic interactionist approach even though their works are not referred to in the present article.

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