Wresting power transforming governance

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Abstract

To bring about a cultural transformation, existing power structures must be challenged and changed. The existing power relationships in a society are both culturally determined and determine culture. Power resides in determining the discourse: that is it determines what is known and what cannot be known; what can be discussed and what isn't even considered.

Earlier discussion in the Transforming Cultures theme identified the issue of power, the exercise of power, and the role of culture in shaping the expression of power came forward as idea to be explored. A subset of this idea, the public health response to power and governance, was also suggested as a topic. Today's topic is to explore power as being a central issue in culture.

First to recap some definitions to help understanding for purposes of this theme:

- If culture is the operating system for society, then governors are the programmers
- Governance: the action or manner of controlling or regulating a state, organization, or people (OED)
- Power: The capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events (OED), or in a Weberian terms, the ability to get outcomes despite resistance
- Democracy: a mechanism for decision taking by those who are going to live with the consequences

Clearly governance is about asserting power. Many forms of governance are possible but, from a primary health care perspective, the better outcomes overall for the wellbeing of humans and the natural world of which humans are a part, would come from a democratic system where people have a high degree of control over their lives and society. A brief recap of the principles and processes of democracy was given (Boxes 1 and 2).

Discussion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, and particularly the Investor-State Dispute Settlement mechanism raised the matter of corporate power, and how corporate power might be resisted.

The suggestion of the use of consumer power was challenged because this concept, while there may be particular uses of it, generally

Box 1: Democracy Principles
- political equality
- avoid tyrannies
- deliberation
- accountable
- reflective, and
- adaptative

and
- subsidiarity

Box 2: Democracy Processes
- Political equality and avoiding tyranny
    - Equal opportunity for personal involvement (up to ≈ 60)
    - Representation - > ≈ 60, by lottery (sortition, sampling)
    - Ensuring **standing** of 'absent' parties
- Deliberation
    - Multiple methods – informed, conversation, face to face (?electronically),
- Reflective and adaptive
    - Multiple methods
- Accountable

and
- Subsidiarity
    - Community based
    - Nested

fails because is accepts the framing that corporations have put on consumer culture. The second idea, localising businesses, was not explored. It does however help to reframe corporate power by refusing to play in, or opting out of, the corporate space. Regulation to ensure triple bottom line reporting was a third option.

The way that the Chicago School's worldview of neoliberalism has taken over the framing of economic and social discourse was given as an example of how power is exercised through culture. Individualism, anti-collective, a market model for human relationships, worth being monetary, people as consumers not citizens are now accepted as normal, that is. how the world naturally works. How one worldview comes to dominate was discussed; several factors contributed.

Val Brown proposed and the proposition accepted that all things have power. We humans all have the same basis of power, intrinsically. This power cannot be lost or given up. However, people can chose to abstain from exercise of their power, as has occurred with the growth of a neoliberal worldview, or with accepting Elizabeth Windsor as our monarch. This choice might be consensual, that is power is voluntarily ceded, gifted or lent. Alternatively it may be taken forcibly. More often, and this is probably the case in many instances, it is distorted, manipulated, or bought. In these situations peoples' agreement may be assumed by those exercising their power, or people may go along with the situation, but consent is never formally given for power to be handed over.

In these latter situations, the exercise or non-exercise of power becomes built into the culture, and the social structures. Particularly when power exercised through brute force cannot prevail, then grounding exercise of power in the culture may be the only option available. The evolution of the divine right of kings when kings could not defeat their magnates directly is an example. Equally, when the exercise of power is embedded in the social structures, then people can chose to accede to that power or can chose to resist it.

For humans, power resides in the relationship networks in which people live. As such it is both fragmented and connected. It also sits with people in the physical and social environments in which people live. It is these factors that help to influence when and how people chose to exercise their power.

The exercise of power may reside in the social structure which is cultural. The exercise of structural power may not be consciously intentional just as setting up the culture may not have been intentional. Therefore influence is gained even though non-intentionally exercising the power available. The culture also provides the social cues for when and how people may choose to exercise

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Power and the Seven Ways of Knowing – take a tree

Introspective – the tree has a sense of itself

Physical – the tree stands in resistance to entropy

Social – the tree wears the power ascribed to it

Ethical – the three holds value as a tree or a forest (separate to any resource value)

Aesthetic – the tree as form and beauty

Sympathetic – the tree feels the presence of other trees and life

Reflective – the tree has power as itself from its place in nature and the social meanings ascribed to it.

their power. Thus individual and groups of people can be disempowered or empowered by their culture.

Power it can be seen then carries many connotations. In essence the core issue is that power is exercised through relationships. It can also be not exercised. It is direct and personal, or it is structural, build into the culture. In this case its exercise is non-consciously intentional. This structural exercise of power can be overt, but more often it is hidden. It is hidden in the way that power is defined within the culture: kings rule by divine right, men are just more intelligent than women, the poor are less worthy. In this way people are dissuaded from exercising their own power by being taught that they have no power.

So in the context of transforming cultures, we need to devise new ways of exercising this power to achieve the desired better outcomes. The details of this project are unclear. Framing culture as a hyperobject (see box 4) however permits us to use this methodology to attempt transformation. That includes not accepting the current power structure or the political theory that underpins it.

Further we need to change the frame of the political discussion. Historically political discussion has been with a political economy framework primarily about the sharing of resources, natural and manufactured. It has taken a primarily resource exchange model of human relationships. Reframing the discussion to be about creating a biosensitive society with the goal of ecological sustainability

creates the need for a new political discourse, one within a political ecology frame. In this frame exercising power involves prioritising the values underpinning biosensitivity and looking for ways to live together with each other within the ecosystem. There may still be exchange but this is no longer the focus.

Since power is a matter of governance then governance too needs to be transformed. It is not about whether we have time or that transforming the socio-political culture is a lesser priority. If we do not take the lead on this transformation to address equity and democracy as a part of this project, then those in power will take the lead to transform our culture in alternative ways that may lead to less fair and peaceful future societies (such as Fortress Earth dystopias).

Commentary by Peter Tait

Power is the capacity to influence the behaviour of other people and things. Everything and every person has power. Power exists in the network of relationships in which people live. People may choose to exercise their power or, for a variety of reasons choose not to exercise their power. Such reasons may be consciously intentional as when power is loaned or ceded to another; it may be forcibly overridden; a person may go along with the situation, but consent is never formally given for power to be handed over. In these situations peoples' agreement may be assumed by those exercising their power. When this becomes the social norm, then this exercise of power may be considered to be coded in the culture. Once thus enculturated, then power is being exercised through the social structure. Structural power use may not be consciously intentional just as setting up the culture may not have been intentional.

Power may be structured into different aspects of the social system: advantage / disadvantage and unfair sharing of benefits can accrue to one section of society along political, economic, gender, race, worldview and other lines.

Considering more precisely social or political power, in response to structural power relationships, we need to reframe the political discussion. Historically political discussion has been with a political economy framework primarily about the sharing of resources, natural and manufactured. It has taken a primarily resource exchange model of human relationships. Reframing the discussion to be about creating a biosensitive society with the goal of ecological sustainability creates the need for a new political discourse, one within a political ecology frame. In this frame exercising power involves prioritising the values underpinning biosensitivity and looking for ways to live together with each other within the ecosystem.

The exercise of political power is a matter of governance. Changing how political power is exercised then requires a transformation of governance. This will require the citizens to exercise their own power in political and in others social sectors. Some may argue that transforming the socio-political culture is a lesser priority because of the urgency to address the various aspects of global environmental change. However if we do not take the lead on this transformation to address equity and democracy as a part of this project, then those in power will take the lead to transform our culture in alternative ways that may lead to less fair and peaceful future societies.