

1 Power and Human Interchange

SOCRATES: . . . I'm sure you've heard the song people sing at parties which offers a list of human advantages: 'The very best thing is health, second good looks, and third'—according to whoever made up the song—'honest wealth.' . . .

GORGIAS: Yes, I have. But why are you bringing it up?

SOCRATES: Well, suppose a doctor, a trainer, and a businessman—who are the people responsible for the qualities the song-writer commended—were standing right there next to you. . . .

'But Gorgias here doesn't agree,' we'd point out. 'He claims that his area of expertise is responsible for something which is more beneficial than anything yours can produce.' . . .

So, Gorgias, please add their imagined request to mine, and tell us what this thing is which is the greatest blessing people can have, according to you, and which you can procure for them.

GORGIAS: When I say there's nothing better, Socrates, that is no more than the truth. It is responsible for personal freedom and enables an individual to gain political power in his community.

SOCRATES: Yes, but what is it?

GORGIAS: I'm talking about the ability to use the spoken word to persuade—to persuade the jurors in the courts, the members of the Council, the citizens attending to Assembly . . . in short, to win over any and every form of public meeting of the citizen body. Armed with this ability, in fact, the doctor would be your slave, the trainers would be yours to command, and that businessman would turn out to be making money not for himself, but for someone else—for you with your ability to speak and to persuade the masses.

—Plato, Gorgias, 451d–452e [Waterfield, trans.]

Few terms in the social sciences have engendered as much mystique (fascination, curiosity, fear) as “power.” In addition to the great many casual references to power (e.g., having power, positions of control, being influential, and empowering) that one finds in the social sciences, a considerable amount of published work has been developed around topics such as power, control, domination, influence, and the like. As will be indicated, however, most of this literature (and the premises on which this material has

been developed) is fundamentally flawed with respect to the manners in which power is conceptualized, studied, and analyzed. Expressed rather directly, the problem is that most analysts have failed to attend to the ways in which people experience (or engage) the power phenomenon on the "here and now" basis in which human group life takes place.

The statement on power developed here is not only attentive to the actualities of ongoing human interchange, but it also invokes a methodological position (ethnographic inquiry) that would enable scholars to study aspects of the power process in more situated, participant-informed fashions.

Envisioning power as denoting instances of meaningful interchange that involve varying arrays of individuals, groups, and interactive alignments, this volume focuses on (a) people's attempts (as tacticians) to shape the situations (and experiences) of others in more direct manners, (b) tacticians' efforts to extend their capacities for influence by involving additional parties in their dealings with (target) others, and (c) the ways that people (as targets) define and make adjustments to the instances of influence they experience. The material presented here, thus, considers people's definitions of, and routings into, situations of [power],* as well as the dilemmas they face, the strategies they assume, and the limitations they encounter as they enter into interchanges with others on both more individualized and collectively coordinated bases and in both long-term and more situated instances.

Rather than reduce power to factors, structures, resources, and the like, power is envisioned as a dynamic, socially constructed essence. Consequently, attention is given to the ways in which people attempt to define and shape (and resist) the directions that human group life assumes. It is hoped that this statement may help to demystify power as a sociological concept not only by attending to this phenomenon as a problematic, reflective, negotiated, feature of ongoing community life, but also by indicating the ways in which scholars methodologically may examine the actual instances of influence that people experience.

Following a discussion of the "power motif" in the literature in chapters 2, 3, and 4, the subsequent chapters represent an application of the symbolic interactionist approach associated most centrally with George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969) to the matter of power. The interactionist tradition has often been described as "micro-sociological,"

*Readers might note that I have bracketed [terms] in some instances (e.g., [power], [the world], [objects]) to draw attention to the particularly problematic nature of the phenomenon referenced by the term or concept under consideration.

atheoretical, and unable to deal with power (see chapter 5). In what follows, however, I intend to show that symbolic interactionism not only represents a theoretically coherent means of transcending “micro-macro” realms of human association, but that it is eminently suited, theoretically and methodologically, for the study of the “power phenomenon” across the range of human association. This volume, thus, is intended not only to establish the conceptual parameters of an interactionist approach to the study of power but also to outline a research agenda that would enable scholars to methodologically engage every instance of power that people might experience.

The material presented in this volume has been developed with one central guiding theme—our conceptualization (theoretical and methodological) of power must attend to the *actualities* of human experience, to the viewpoints, activities, and interactions of the *people* about whom we, as social scientists, purport to speak. The emphasis is on power, not as an objective condition or a subjective experience, but as a matter of *intersubjective accomplishment*.

This means focusing on people’s experiences with power in a comprehensive, definitional, action-oriented sense, and attending to the ways in which people manage interchanges with others in practice. The objective, thus, is to develop a transsituational or transcontextual conceptualization of power that would lend itself to empirical investigation (and theoretical reformulation) through sustained ethnographic inquiry of people’s experiences with [power] in the various here and now situations in which they find themselves. Working with this central mission of comprehending human lived experience, there is no attempt to suggest remedies or prescriptions for human practices pertaining to aspects of power, however bothersome or troublesome some may find particular human behaviors (orientations, activities, traditions or organizational practices) in this or that regard.

Likewise, there is no attempt to propose a synthesis of the various theoretical viewpoints that people have developed in discussing power (and related phenomena). Some worthwhile insights into the power phenomenon have been (and will continue to be) generated in a great many sources, but the literature introduced here is subjected to one primary criterion—does it attend to power as a matter of intersubjective accomplishment; *does the approach* (theoretical viewpoint, conceptual scheme, methodology) *under consideration enable us to envision and study the ways in which human interchange is worked out in the ongoing instances of the here and now in which community life takes place?* This emphasis represents the primary anchorage or reference point in dealing with what otherwise is a massive, complex, and highly diffuse literature. However, as indicated in chapters 2 and 3, this becomes a rather severe reference point for assessing existing work in the social sciences.

Those more characteristically assuming “pluralist” or “eclectic” orien-

tations, as well as those presuming particular (structuralist, moralist-advocacy) viewpoints, may be troubled by this tact, but the emphasis is on "respecting the world of human lived experience" (Blumer, 1969; Strauss, 1993; Prus, 1996b, 1997b). This means developing theory that is methodologically grounded in (and informed by) people's experiences with [the world] rather than embarking on high-level (grand) theorizing or pursuing agendas intended to change or control the nature or direction of community life.

Toward an Interactionist Conceptualization of Power

Although it is unfortunate in certain respects that the interactionists have not attended to power in more sustained and explicit manners, this same "inattentiveness" to power has been most beneficial for the development of a more genuine social science. On the one hand, this means that the interactionist literature is more difficult to characterize in [power] themes. On the other hand, and in a much more important sense, though, it has meant that the interactionists could approach the study of the human condition without being encumbered by the sorts of power agendas or motifs that have overshadowed and distorted the analytical renderings of a great many scholars.

While providing a conceptual frame and a methodological orientation for pursuing the study of power in interactionist terms, I clearly do *not* intend to refocus the interactionist agenda by suggesting that considerations of power be placed at the center of interactionist concerns. Rather, this volume represents a necessary corrective to those social scientists who, in the quest for an analysis of "power," have failed to locate considerations of power within the more fundamental features of human lived experience. Unless more directly challenged, these scholars may divert the social science community even further from its central mission of comprehending the human condition.

The interactionist emphasis on the ways in which people engage [the world] about them has some vital implications for the ways in which social scientists approach [power]. First, the interactionist emphasis on examining the ways in which people do things focuses attention on the situated or "here and now" instances of human enterprise that constitute human group life in the making. Because they examine the ways in which people engage the world in accomplishing particular sets of activities, the interactionists have developed an exceptionally extensive, viable, and grounded awareness (and literature) of human enterprise of a wide diversity of life-worlds. Nothing comparable exists, as a basis for developing theory (and research) on human interchange, in any other realm or tradition of the social sciences.¹

Although the interactionist approach only recently has been explicitly cast in terms of multiple social worlds (Strauss, 1978a, 1982, 1984, 1993) or a "subcultural mosaic" (Prus, 1997b), the interactionist community has long been attentive to the notions of a pluralistic, subculturally constituted society. Notions of these sorts may be traced back to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Georg Simmel (1858–1918), but they also have been the perpetual by-products of virtually every instance of research conducted within the Chicago (interactionist/ethnographic) tradition.

On the surface, a mosaics or multiple-life world orientation seems relatively innocuous or mundane. Its potential, however, vis-à-vis the [power] phenomenon is rather consequential. Instead of subscribing to overarching rationalities or grand images of power that might somehow encompass broader societies, it becomes apparent that any society is made up of a plurality of human life-worlds and considerations of the power phenomenon (and human relations more generally) should be approached in manners that centrally acknowledge these multiple life-worlds.

Third, while pursuing the pragmatist agenda of attending to the ways in which people accomplish activity in practice, the interactionists have also been long concerned with the task of developing concepts that would enable researchers to make comparisons across the multiple life-worlds that they encounter. Thus, although power represents a situated, definitional element from an interactionist viewpoint, the conceptual understandings of [power] developed from an interactionist perspective are not limited to political arenas or overt instances of confrontation or control, for instance. They are relevant to *any* life-world setting in which the participants invoke images of power, influence, control, resistance, and the like. The material that follows is critical of much of the social science enterprise revolving around considerations of power. At the same time, however, this volume is intended to make the *study* of power much more accessible to those in the social sciences by grounding a research agenda in the multiple life-worlds in which human group life is accomplished.

The World of Human Lived Experience

Let me begin by identifying the empirical social world in the case of human beings. This world is the actual group life of human beings. It consists of what they experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living; it covers the large complexes of interlaced activities that grow up as the actions of some spread out to affect the actions of others; and it embodies the large variety of relationships between the participants. . . . The empirical world, in short, is the world of everyday experience. . . . Ongoing group life, whether in the past or the present, whether in the case of this or that

people, whether in one or another geographical area, is the empirical social world of the social and psychological sciences.

—Blumer, 1969:35

In adopting an interactionist position (see chapter 5 for more detail), we begin with the observation that *all* human behavior is to be understood within the context of ongoing community life. As Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) emphasize, society consists of people with selves in interaction, but people *only* develop selves through linguistic (or symbolic) interchange with those who have predated their presence within the human community. As well, because people “do things,” it is essential that social scientists develop a more explicit appreciation of all of the *activities* entailed in both the human struggle for existence and any other pursuits in which people may meaningfully engage.

In contrast to those who might study other objects (i.e., as in the physical sciences), the interactionists argue for a social science that theoretically *and* methodologically *respects the human essence*. Thus, at a most fundamental level, the interactionists observe that people have capacities to (1) use language (symbols) to communicate with others regarding [the world] around them; (2) assign differing meanings to [objects];² (3) take themselves and others into account in acting toward the world; (4) deliberately invoke specific behaviors in engaging the world; (5) influence and resist one another; (6) develop selective affiliations or associations with other people; and (7) attend to notions of emergence, sequence or temporality. In other words, this requires that scholars of the human condition recognize the (1) intersubjective, (2) multiperspectival, (3) reflective, (4) action-oriented, (5) negotiable, (6) relational, and (7) processual dimensions of human community life.³

Because acknowledgements or assumptions of this sort differentiate humans from other objects of study, the interactionists (Blumer, 1928; 1969) have been long concerned about developing a methodology that respects the *social* essences of the human group. While acknowledging the importance of (a) observation as an information gathering procedure, the interactionists have centrally employed (b) extended open-ended interviews with those whose life-worlds are being studied and (c) sustained participant-observation in those settings as the primary methods for *achieving intersubjectivity* with those whose life-world experiences they seek to establish familiarity.

Observations of people’s activities may provide researchers with preliminary images of other people’s life-worlds, enable researchers to develop some issues for subsequent inquiry, and serve as a basis for assessing information attained in other ways. However, if researchers are to develop *intimate familiarity* (Blumer, 1969) with the life-worlds of others, then it is necessary

to achieve an “insiderness” with these other people. This is *attainable only when* others linguistically share their experiences (viewpoints, meanings, activities) with researchers.

As much as possible, then, the interactionists attempt to achieve comprehensive levels of intersubjectivity by immersing themselves (ethnographically) in the life-worlds of “the other.” Ethnographers often assume member or participant roles as a means of more completely accessing others (and their experiences) in the setting, but even more consequential is the matter of engaging the participants in sustained interchange. In these ways, the interactionists attempt to uncover people’s experiences with the world in as complete and thorough manners as possible. As Blumer (1928) observes these practices are far from perfect and people studying the human condition are unable to achieve the rigor or precision associated with much research in the physical sciences. Still, there is no other way that researchers may serve as effective (intersubjective) conduits between those whose life-worlds are being studied and those wishing to learn about the life-worlds of other people:

(T)he empirical social world consists of ongoing group life and one has to get close to this life to know what is going on in it. If one is going to respect the social world, one’s problems, guiding conceptions, data, schemes of relationship, and ideas of interpretation have to be faithful to that empirical world. This is especially true in the case of human group life because of the persistent tendency of human beings in their collective life to build up separate worlds, marked by an operating milieu of different life situations and by the possession of different beliefs and conceptions for handling these situations. (Blumer, 1969:38)

Power as Intersubjective Accomplishment

Locating power more directly within an interactionist framework, this volume not only permeates much of the mystique shrouding “power,” but also provides a conceptual scheme and methodological approach for examining instances of control (influence and resistance) within the interchanges characterizing ongoing community life.

Viewing power as a matter of intersubjective accomplishment, the material presented here examines power as a *collectively enacted* phenomenon. Addressing the full range of association (e.g., communication, cooperation, conflict, competition, compromise, celebration) occurring in small group settings to large-scale (e.g., media, government, military) theaters of operation, this volume provides a conceptually viable means of synthesizing so-called “macro” and “micro” realms of power.

Rather than assuming that power is an omnipresent phenomena, this volume examines the ways in which notions of power, control, influence,

and the like *are brought into existence* in human association and the sorts of roles and relationships that people (as both tacticians and targets) develop with respect to this phenomenon as they go about their day-to-day activities in a world in which reality is not theirs alone to determine. The two following passages (extracted from chapter 5) centrally address this notion.

Power represents a phenomenon the existence of which . . . is always contingent on instances of human definition and enterprise for its essence. . . . Power implies an intent and a capacity on the part of a person or group to influence, control, dominate, persuade, manipulate, or otherwise affect the behaviors, experiences, or situations of some target. As a quality imputed to a situation by some audience, *power is brought into existence only when someone defines the situation in power or influence (and resistance) terms of some sort.*

This means that *the essential starting point for any analysis of power hinges on the definitions that people make*, however tentatively, of specific situations in reference to matters of influence, control, domination, and the like. In the absence of definitions implying power dimensions, the situations in question may be viewed in many other ways, such as play, fun, fascinating, work, frustrating, confusing, boring, instructive, educational, challenging, cooperative, helpful, and so forth.

Because of its attentiveness to people's situated experiences (definitions, activities, interchanges), interactionism provides a particularly viable means of approaching the *study* of power (as it is manifested within the human community). Not only is the interactionist viewpoint more amenable to considerations of the ways in which [power] is brought into existence, implemented, experienced, sustained, objectified, resisted, dissipated, and reconstituted in actual practice than are other approaches in the social sciences, but interactionism (by means of ethnographic inquiry) also provides the essential methodology for examining power as an element of human lived experience. Like other aspects of human group life, power is an *intersubjective* phenomenon. If social scientists are to respect the intersubjective essence of the human condition, then our notions of power must reflect the social (linguistic, interpretive, active, interactive) foundations of the human community.

Overviewing the Chapters

To further set the stage for the reader, brief descriptions of the contents of the subsequent chapters are presented.

Part 2: The Power Motif

Chapters 2 (*Structuralist Variants in the Literature*) and 3 (*Tactical Themes in the Social Sciences*) provide a historical and contemporary overview of the ways in

which social scientists have approached power as an element of community life. To this end, the writings of a number of foundational social theorists (e.g., Weber, Durkheim, and Marx) are given attention as are some more contemporary authors and researchers whose works reflect these earlier sources and related themes. In addition to outlining the baseline positions of these scholars as these pertain to power, consideration is given to the question of whether these sources approach power as denoting instances of intersubjective accomplishment.

Chapter 4, *Enduring Tactical Themes*, locates concerns with human interchange (and power relations) within a yet broader historical and substantive framework. Although often overlooked in more contemporary discussions of social thought (and power), the writings of the early Greek (and Roman) scholars are much more instructive for comprehending human power relations and contemporary social thought than seems commonly supposed. The writings of a series of tactical (and practical) advisors, from Isocrates and Aristotle to Machiavelli onward, are considered here. Suggesting a great many insights and avenues of inquiry for those interested in community life, this material constitutes a valuable backdrop for comprehending human interchange.

Part 3: Power as Intersubjective Accomplishment

The chapters in Part 3 have been developed mindfully of the literature (academic and tactical) considered in chapters 2–4. However, rather than representing a sustained synthesis of this literature, the emphasis is on developing a means of examining power as an enacted phenomenon. This implies establishing a conceptual frame, outlining a methodological orientation, and specifying a set of arenas for studying human interchange as instances of group life in the making.

It is hoped that these materials may enable the community of social scientists to examine human relations in process terms, from the viewpoints of the participants, in all of its manifestations, and in comparative fashions. It is most unlikely that our understandings of human relations will ever be complete, but if the legacy that we pass on to subsequent generations of scholars is to be more adequate, then we have an obligation to do more than talk (and moralize) about power; we need to examine [power] in the instances of the here and now in which human group life is constituted.

Chapter 5 (*Attending to Human Interchange*) introduces the interactionist tradition and lays the conceptual groundwork for a theory of power that is interpretive, activity-based, and interactive in its essence. Following a consideration of the interactionist paradigm and interactionist materials that deal more directly with power, attention is given to the definitional, processual, and engaging features of human relations.

Chapters 6–8 focus on people's experiences as tacticians and targets in a variety of arenas. These range from dyadic and triadic encounters to all levels and manners of extended associations. Building on the existing ethnographic literature, this material suggests a series of research sites in which matters of influence and resistance may be empirically (i.e., ethnographically) pursued and conceptually synthesized.

Chapter 6 (*Engaging in Tactical Enterprise*) deals with the more fundamental forms of influence work that people may deploy across interactional settings. Thus, consideration is given to the ways that people may endeavor to influence others by invoking (assortments of) enhancing practices, focusing procedures, neutralizing (and debasing) strategies, and leveraging tactics. While addressing dyadic relations in rather central manners, this material is relevant to all levels (and complexities of association).

Chapter 7 (*Extending the Theater of Operations*) examines the ways in which tacticians may endeavor to involve others in their dealings with targets. The tactical considerations outlined in chapter 6 are extended consequentially (into more "macro" realms) by focusing on matters such as working with third parties, developing collective ventures, using the media, and pursuing political agendas (governmental forums, military operations, and control agencies).

Chapter 8 (*Experiencing Target Roles*) both reflects and qualifies the preceding discussions of tactician roles. Beyond (a) the identification of a variety of roles that people may assume as targets, explicit recognition is given to (b) targets' capacities for tactical resistance (and active engagement) in both more solitary and collective manners, and (c) people's involvements as targets and tacticians in competitive arenas and (other) collective events. Recognizing the interchangeability of standpoints of targets and tacticians, the material found in chapter 8 is essential for comprehending influence work as intersubjective accomplishment.

Serving as a concluding statement, chapter 9 (*Engaging the Power Motif*) addresses the broader agenda of attending to human group life as it is accomplished in practice and the particular importance of approaching the study of power through sustained ethnographic inquiry.

As they examine this volume, some readers may feel that the viewpoints of various classical social theorists have been shuttled aside in favor of a relatively new orientation (symbolic interaction) to the realm of social theory. While rather specifically focused on the *power* phenomenon, the present statement resonates with aspects of the writings of a great many "social theorists," from Plato, Aristotle, and the sophists who preceded them to Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau, to Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, to Parsons, Homans, and Foucault, as well as Dilthey, Simmel, and Dewey, for instance. Albeit working with a wide variety of assumptions and intentions, all of these scholars have struggled with the matter of people's relations with

one another within the context of community life. Likewise, there may be considerable merit in indicating more explicitly how one can find aspects of interactionist thought in the works of these and other scholars whose work generally is seen to fall in other traditions. Still, the statement provided here is not intended as a textbook on social theory, nor is it syncretical or eclectic in its emphasis.

The ideas of a great many classic and contemporary social theorists are intriguing and speak to a variety of consequential features of group life. Likewise, one may well appreciate the creative, sophisticated, or complex (often geniuslike) conceptualizations of community life that these scholars have articulated. However, because their ideas are compelling in many respects and their analyses so multifaceted, it is necessary to maintain a steadfast focus on our primary objective, namely the task of examining power as an *enacted* phenomenon within human lived experience.

This requires that we concentrate on the baseline assumptions (and parameters) of the works of various theorists who have addressed the matter of power. Otherwise, it is easy to become distracted by the many fascinating arrays of moralities, rationalities, conceptual schemes, methodological stances, and agendas that these same authors may have pursued in one or another of their writings.

Although particular statements embedded within their larger works suggest that most of these social theorists acknowledge aspects of people's more immediate life-world circumstances (and experiences), these scholars' searches for solutions to the "problems of the time" and their quests for overarching rationalities or master schemes seem to have diverted them from attending, on a more explicit and sustained basis, to community life *in the making*. Quite directly, most of the social theorists who have addressed the power phenomenon have failed to envision human group life as centrally constituted by thinking, acting, interacting beings who engage [the world] on a perpetual here and now basis.

Notes

1. Although this volume is centrally defined from an interactionist perspective, many will recognize substantial affinities of the present project with the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (1962, 1964), which, rather notably, has been pursued by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) as "the social construction of reality" and Harold Garfinkel (1967) under the rubric of "ethnomethodology." Albeit with somewhat different emphases, these scholars all focus on the ways in which people make sense of the world or manage encounters with "reality."

Like many in the interactionist community, I have very much benefited from the work that Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, Garfinkel, and

others in this interpretivist tradition have done. Not only have they helped clarify the philosophical underpinnings of the interpretive processes that characterize human group life, but some of those (mostly ethnomethodologists) working in this tradition have attempted to come to terms with the practical accomplishment of everyday life by directly studying the things that people do on a more situated basis. In these regards, then, the present project may also be seen as an extension of the broader phenomenological, social constructionist, or ethnomethodological enterprise.

While many phenomenological sociologists (and ethnomethodologists) seem only marginally acquainted with the works of Mead, Blumer, and the Chicago ethnographic research tradition of symbolic interaction, there are many affinities within the two traditions. Valuable review statements on ethnomethodology can be found in Meehan and Wood (1975), Zimmerman (1978), Leiter (1980), and Coulon (1995). Readers may observe that the present volume is very much concerned with the ways in which people make sense of the world on a situated (and enduring) basis, but places proportionately greater (and more consistent) emphasis on the ways in which people *engage* one another within the context of ongoing community life.

Those more familiar with "ethnomethods" may also note that the present work is sharply at variance from much "conversational analysis" (that which resembles content analysis, presumes underlying linguistic structures, or is conducted from transcripts interpreted largely without the aid of direct interchange with the speakers). This genre violates the basic intersubjectivist essences of Schutzian phenomenology. However, there is much mutuality with other strands of ethnomethodology (especially those scholars who focus on the "doing of activity from member perspectives").

2. It should be acknowledged that people may not only define and act toward [things] in a great many ways but they also vary greatly in the [object distinctions] with which they work. This is not to deny the existence of "things," but rather to point to the socially (intersubjectively identified, defined, and objectified) and situationally enacted essences of [objects]. Approached thusly, an object *is any item, thing, distinction, concept, behavior, or image to which people may refer (i.e., become aware of, attend to, point to, acknowledge, consider, discuss, or otherwise act toward)* [Prus, 1996b:30]. For further elaboration on [objects] and the human condition, see Prus (1997b).

3. Mead (1934), Blumer (1969), Strauss (1993), and Prus (1996b, 1997b) provide more extended discussions of these and related theoretical and methodological matters.