

# *Power Actors and Social Change*

## *Part I*

RONALD C. POWERS

*In every social system (i.e., family, organization, community) certain persons have the capacity to influence or determine the decisions of others. As Extension moves into new arenas of community-wide educational activities, it is important for staff members to be able to identify these "power actors." The Extension agent or teacher who understands social power and who can identify the community power actors can enhance his chance for success in social action efforts. The author defines concepts of social power, power actor, and community power structure, summarizes research on community power, and gives implications for Extension.*

RESEARCH has shown that certain individuals in every social system—family, community, organization, and the like—can and do influence the decisions or actions of others. Often a community social action project fails because key people in the community power structure were not recognized or appropriately involved. The change agent, such as the Extension worker or teacher, who has a basic understanding of social power and who can identify the individual "power actors" in the community, can enhance his chance for success in social action efforts.

Early Extension efforts were largely confined to the farmer and his family. The concern was with improving the base for *individual* decisions. Each "student" could make up his own mind without affecting his neighbor in any particular way. Recent efforts in Extension education include urban clientele. Present and future educational efforts, such as community and resource development, present a new complex of human relationships to the Extension worker. Now, in addition to the continued emphasis on individual adoption and decision regarding new ideas and practices, Extension is concerned with initiating educational efforts which relate to the

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RONALD C. POWERS is Associate Professor of Sociology and Extension Sociologist, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

institutional dimensions of the total community: schools, churches, voluntary organizations, and local governmental units. Such areas are by definition subject to controversy because institutional change is the story of human values in conflict—conflict which is resolved by various proportions of votes, petition signers, or voluntary campaigns. These efforts also relate to the total population in the community, county, or area—urban and rural.

Thus, not only is Extension approaching the task of interacting with more people and a people with different needs, attitudes, and habits, but a people who have various images of Extension. What different strategies are needed in working with such people? Who are the relevant people for initiating such educational programs?

Since community decision making is more complex than individual decision making per se, the processes of instigated social action become important. There are several models of social action,<sup>1</sup> but all of them share one step in common—*legitimation*.

Legitimation involves obtaining sanction, approval, and/or license to act from those individuals who have the capacity to influence or determine the decisions of people in the arena of action. The individuals who have this capacity at the community level are referred to as key leaders, influentials, power actors, decision makers, and legitimizers. These terms will be used interchangeably, but with emphasis on the term “power actors.”

Power actors in a community usually relate to all or some of the other power actors, thereby forming a community power structure. In some communities there may be several different focal points of power rather than one.

For the most part, Extension workers have not been closely related to the community power structure. Power actors frequently do not know the Extension agents in their area. By the same token, Extension workers frequently do not name the same set of power actors that other community knowledgeable do. Most Extension workers in agriculture do know and have access to the farmers who are innovators in adopting new technology. But this is not tantamount to knowing and having access to the community power actors who are most important to other issue areas.

This does not imply that Extension should work only with the community power structure. It does imply that there is a need to understand the operation and dynamics of social power in communities and that it is useful for Extension workers to have a method for identifying these people. Any change effort—including educa-

<sup>1</sup> See particularly George M. Beal, *How Does Social Change Occur?*, RS-264 (Ames: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1958).

tional and informational programs by Extension—must decide on the role of power actors in relationship to these efforts. Bypassing or avoiding contact with such people is one alternative. So is early contact, informal discussion, and reasoning.

For the purpose of this article, three assumptions can be made. First, Extension workers at all levels will increasingly work with clientele and subject matter that aim toward eventual community decision making about potentially controversial areas. Here we are talking about dealing with information regarding such issues as schools, churches, and local government. The second assumption is that community power actors who come predominately from within towns or cities usually need to be identified and involved at an early stage of the social action—including Extension educational efforts. The last assumption is that Extension workers need to have an increased understanding of how the community power structure functions, and a usable technique for identifying the power actors in their communities.

In this article we will: (1) define the concepts of social power, power actor, and community power structure; (2) summarize current research on community power; and (3) outline some implications of these findings for strategy in Extension education. In part II, to be carried in a subsequent issue of the *Journal*, we will discuss various procedures used to identify members of community power structures and set forth a procedure that Extension workers can use in their area.

#### DEFINING TERMS

“Social power” usually is defined as “the capacity to control the actions of others.” The means by which control is achieved is the important consideration. Loomis<sup>2</sup> includes three means of control: authority, influence, and unlegitimized coercion. *Authority* is the power given to the individual by the system (i.e., an office, whether elected, appointed, or delegated). *Influence* is the amount of power an individual has by virtue of control of or access to resources relevant to the proposed social action. Loomis says that the capacity to influence resides in the individual and his abilities, not in the role itself. Influence may be due to such factors as wealth, reputation, skill in handling people, special knowledge of the social system, or reciprocal obligation. *Unlegitimized coercion* accounts for the control of others through means outside accepted social norms, e.g.,

<sup>2</sup>Charles P. Loomis, *Social Systems* (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1960).

obtaining money at gunpoint. Just what separates unlegitimized coercion from "pressure" or "arm-twisting" is difficult to ascertain. Acceptable means of influence vary by community and social class.

It is immediately apparent that some persons have more social power than do others. Those who frequently and consistently realize their will, even when others resist, we call "power actors." Other terms such as legitimizers, key influentials, and decision makers have the same essential meaning. All are arbitrary in that the number of persons in a community who are accorded this "title" is determined by the frequency with which they are mentioned or observed to exercise power.

The power structure is an "identifiable interaction pattern" composed of power actors who may relate to each other in a number of different ways. During the last decade of research on community power, most of the following types of power structure have been observed:

*One-person power structure:* Power centers in one individual who is then surrounded by "lieutenants." An example is a situation where one family has dominated a community for generations or where one person or company "owns" a town. The number of communities fitting this description is on the wane because of the mobility, specialization, and interdependence of today's society.

*Tightly-knit group:* The decision making of the community is controlled by the "power elite." This type of power structure, which may be a kind of local aristocracy, is also disappearing for the above reasons.

*Segmented power structure:* In this case there are at least two separate power structures in the community, each of which may take the form of the other types already described. Examples are: Republican/Democrat, Protestant/Catholic, liberal/conservative, labor/management, and rural/urban. The segmented power structure is not necessarily limited to two groups, however.

*"Power pool" or "diffused" power structure:* Essentially there is a "pool" of power actors. Within this more or less loosely-knit group there is some specialization by issue areas. All of the power actors do not act in concert on every issue. For example, only a few will be at the core of issue A. Similarly, three or four may be at the core of issue B. Only one or two may be involved in both.

It will be well to keep in mind that in this article social power includes both authority and influence. Particularly, the term "influence" is only *part* of an individual's social power rather than being a synonymous term. Much of the literature does not make this distinction.

## SOME GENERALIZATIONS

Though many power studies have been conducted in the last decade, relatively few generalizations can be stated with certainty. That is, few findings can be predicted to occur in every community. The generalizations discussed here range from those found in every community studied to those which represent only general tendencies. In choosing strategies for social action, Extension workers should find this level of generality useful, though far from ideal. No attempt is made to state all of the findings of research that has been conducted.<sup>3</sup>

*The Existence and Exercise of Power*

Social power exists in every community and is exercised by power actors. The bases of power and range of power for given individuals may differ considerably from one community to another.

Observers have sometimes concluded that a community is in a "power vacuum" or that the "power structure is in transition" because no monolithic consensus was achieved in the naming of power actors, only formal office holders were named, or the observable trappings of the community (i.e., appearance of Main Street or recreation facilities) were in a state of decline or disrepair. Exercised power and "progress" need not be directly related, however. Power actors may oppose change—and have their way. They may express no opinion on an issue but still affect the outcome because people assume that silence is also a message of power.

Every community power structure is in some state of transition. The rate of transition, the solidarity or diffuseness of the power actors, and "membership" in the power structure may vary considerably from one community to another and within a given community over time. In short, a community power structure is a dynamic social system.

The fact that respondents in social power studies do answer questions about the phenomenon of social power and that they can and do differentiate among people as to the power possessed is evidence that power exists and is exercised.

<sup>3</sup>See George M. Beal, "Social Action: Instigated Social Change in Large Social Systems," in James H. Copp (ed.), *Our Changing Rural Society* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1964); Wendell Bell *et al.*, *Public Leadership* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1960); Ritchie P. Lowry, *Who's Running This Town?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Robert Presthus, *Men at the Top* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Carol E. Thometz, *The Decision Makers* (Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963); and Aaron Wildavsky, *Leadership in a Small Town* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1964).

### *Specialization by Issue Areas*

In general, power actors tend to specialize by issue area in accord with their skills, knowledge, interest areas, and community expectations. Some power actors may, however, appear in several issue areas. Present research indicates that specialization increases as community size increases. It appears that once community size goes above about 2500, the percentage of power actors involved in most issues declines. There is considerable overlap between issues in small communities because, as one power actor from a small town of 1500 said, "There aren't enough brains in this community to specialize." Overlapping of 40-60 per cent between issues in communities of 5000-25,000 is fairly common.

### *Type of Power Structure*

Community power actors relate to each other (interact) in some fashion, thereby forming a community power structure. The particular type of structure may vary considerably from one community to another, depending in part on such factors as size of community, ethnic composition, political alignments, religious denominations, economic base, and social class structure.

In line with the previous generalization, many communities appear to have a diffused power structure in which the power actors form a loosely-knit structure from which particular individuals are drawn into the core of specific issues—with some overlapping or linkage from one issue to another. This does not mean that all power actors in the "power pool" will always agree. There may be rather well-defined cliques within the pool, with little, if any, overlap. Logically, one could define as a possibility such complete specialization by issue area that no overlap occurs and thus there are as many separate power groups as there are issue areas. Such a situation has not been found in any community study of social power. For one reason, there is often a common set of resources (capital, credit control, mass media) crucial to nearly every major issue. These resources are often controlled within a community by one individual; that is, there is one newspaper or one bank. As such, there will be some overlap in the individuals involved in different issue areas.

The main point is that there will be a structuring of interaction between power actors in every community. The particular form of the power structure, ranging from the case of a single person in charge of all decisions to that where power is diffused among many factions, can as yet be predicted only in a crude fashion. A more

complete knowledge of the community along the lines suggested by Sanders<sup>4</sup> would be helpful in making such a prediction.

### *Authority and Influence*

The social power of top power actors is generally a function of their current influence rather than their authority. This appears particularly true in communities of over 2500. This generalization means that persons currently most powerful in a community do not generally hold formal offices at the same time.

That publicly elected (or appointed and delegated) officials do have power cannot be seriously challenged. Nor should change agents underestimate the sanctions that such persons can bring to bear on community issues. The question is whether such persons have greater, lesser, or equivalent power to that of the informal power actors. As inferred above, considerable research indicates that top power actors have less authority (as measured by number and level of offices held) than do power actors with less social power. Publicly elected officials seem to play a major role in *implementing* decisions that come within their officially defined perspective. Such actions as setting a date for a bond issue or approving a permit often come after other power actors have *initiated* or *legitimized* the decision. In the case of a school bond issue, the superintendent and board of education (both holders of authority) may decide to initiate action on a bond issue—but the success or failure may depend upon when, how, and who contacts the top community power actors.

Research has not yet dealt with the problem of differences in authority positions such as the elected positions of mayor or president of Kiwanis and the chairman of the bank board or industrial development corporation. The criteria for being selected to such positions are frequently different. The extent and kind of resources controlled are also different. An examination of the authority positions held by top power actors indicates that they have some tendency to hold the latter type of official position, i.e., bank chairman. Thus an essential feature of a person's total power may be access to several bases of influence *plus* certain strategic offices. A top power actor may hold an honorary office such as chairman of United Fund or a hospital drive. This "office" is intended to influence persons to contribute and is a kind of "image builder" for the power actor.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of many variables important to community analysis, see Irwin T. Sanders, *The Community: An Introduction to a Social System* (2nd ed.; New York: Ronald Press Co., 1966).

In many issue areas, for the purpose of legitimizing changes in the public arena, it may be said that persons holding public office are *necessary* but not *sufficient* reference points. The variability in persons holding public office, as well as their "behavior," is much greater than that of the informal power holder. The preponderance of data indicates that persons believed to have the most power in a community hold few if any formal positions. To paraphrase one study, "to list all the persons holding formal positions in a community would give one a 50-50 chance of identifying the real influentials."

#### *Routes to Power*

"Membership" in a power structure is not a random event, according to several studies identifying prescribed routes to power. Current power actors readily suggest the necessary steps. Usually this involves joining the "right" groups, serving in various capacities, being visible to the community, successful in one's own business, and willing to listen to advice from "us." In a study in Dallas, Texas, it was found that one particular club served as a training ground for aspiring power actors.<sup>5</sup> Smaller communities have their counterparts in clubs such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and Jaycees.

The extent to which this socialization process occurs is dramatically documented in research findings that compare previous activities of top power actors with the prescriptions they give for younger persons seeking to "rise." In most cases, the prescription is a carbon copy of their own behavior 10 to 15 years earlier.

#### *Characteristics of Power Actors*

In most power studies, businessmen are at the fore of community power structures, often comprising as much as 75 per cent of the total power structure. The differences in personal and social characteristics of power actors and those of a random sample of community residents are perhaps best illustrated by data from a rural community of about 5000.<sup>6</sup> Power actors differed significantly from other community residents in regard to income, education, occupational status, age, and per cent of home ownership. When these power actors were compared with power actors in four other communities ranging in size from 600 to 1600, there were no significant

<sup>5</sup> Thometz, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Joe M. Bohlen *et al.*, *Community Power Structure and Civil Defense*, Rural Sociology Report No. 35 (Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Economics and Sociology, 1964).

differences in sex, age, education, length of residence in the community, home ownership, number of people living in the household, or number of children under 18 years.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the power structure of a community is likely to be made up of persons from the major occupational sectors—though not in proportion—such as business, government, education, and health. Furthermore, they are likely to be older, make more money, have more education, and be in a higher status occupation. The power structure is *not* composed of persons across the total social and economic strata of the community.

### *Men and Women Influentials*

Present research indicates that community power actors are predominately men. In a study of five Iowa communities,<sup>8</sup> only two women were included among the 91 power actors identified. Presthus<sup>9</sup> and Thometz<sup>10</sup> found no women among their key influentials. In a study of a college community, Wildavsky<sup>11</sup> found that women made up about 5 per cent of his leadership pool. This does not mean that community affairs are outside the scope of women. However, men are perceived to be more active in initiating community-wide decisions. Even in organizations predominately made up of women, such as mental health associations and welfare organizations, men frequently play major roles—including the formal power positions.<sup>12</sup>

In a study of women influentials in four Iowa communities, women were named as influential in such issues as education, health, politics, and cultural affairs—but in most instances, respondents then listed men they believed were even more influential.<sup>13</sup> Women named as influentials were active in organizations (an average of 6.8 memberships per power actor), held several offices, and participated at extracommunity levels in various organizations. This was also true in a Michigan study, with top women influentials

<sup>7</sup> Joe M. Bohlen *et al.*, *Community Power Actors and Civil Defense*, Rural Sociology Report No. 40 (Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Economics and Sociology, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Presthus, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Thometz, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Wildavsky, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Babchuk, Ruth Marsey, and C. Wayne Gordon, "Men and Women in Community Agencies: A Note on Power and Prestige," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (June, 1960), 399-403.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald C. Powers, "The Incidence of Women in Community Power Structures," paper presented at Rural Sociological Meeting, Miami, Florida, August, 1966.

found to belong to five or six community organizations, on the average.<sup>14</sup>

#### IMPLICATIONS OF POWER STRUCTURE

There are innumerable implications for Extension workers which can be derived from the generalizations discussed. The implications will apply or not apply depending upon such factors as the scope of the program in which a particular staff member is involved, his own background in terms of present access to power actors, and the complexity (size) of community in which he operates. A few major implications will be suggested here that are assumed to be applicable to nearly all Extension workers.

To the extent that many Extension staff members have been involved in educational programs of primary relevance to farmers, there is a need to recognize that influential farmers (innovators and early adopters) may not fulfill the role of legitimizers for community-wide projects. In the first place, innovators by definition habitually deviate from the norms. They do not restrict their actions to those that will be immediately approved by the majority. The power actor, on the other hand, is very cognizant of what the "constituency" will do. Second, the town resident is unlikely to be influenced by farm residents regardless of the issue, primarily because he does not identify with them and sees little connection between the affairs of town and those of the rural area. Thus, the agent who becomes involved in educational efforts or action projects of a community-wide nature (particularly of a community-center nature) will find it important to identify the power actors in the community center. Further, if he wishes to seek legitimation for conducting educational efforts outside of agriculture, he will need to identify these people.

A second implication regards the mode of working with power actors. The typical Extension approach has been to "form a committee." Power actors generally prefer to operate much more informally, minimizing the formal, large, long-winded styles of deliberation characteristic of committees. They maximize the small, short, dual-purpose meetings, i.e., talking and eating, or talking and drinking. They also maximize use of telephones, and tend to minimize publicity in the early stages of decision making.

Power actors sometimes serve on formal committees, particularly if the committee is an extra-local organization. For one reason, this

<sup>14</sup> Anna B. Brown, "Women Influentials," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, 1 (Summer, 1964), 102.

probably enhances their local power position. They sometimes serve as honorary chairmen or committee members for a worthwhile and noncontroversial cause such as the United Fund drive, thus lending their prestige to an issue which may be useful in bringing about the desired action as well as building their image.

Because power actors tend to specialize by issue area, the change agent needs to recognize that different people play the role of legitimizer, depending upon the issue. Likewise, in a diffused power structure, the problem of communication between segments or cliques needs to be solved. Due to lack of information, misinformation, and the like, the Extension staff member may find concern and/or opposition from a quarter he has defined as irrelevant. Power actors, like role incumbents of organizations, are always "watch dogging" for actions they can define—albeit wrong—as an attempt to usurp their function or to bypass them. Thus, even though a community power structure may be specialized or even segmented by issues, this does not necessarily mean that legitimation need take place with only one group.

The finding regarding the number of women in the power structure should not be taken to mean that women and their organizations are not valuable resources in community affairs. Women do address themselves to certain issue areas, particularly of an "expressive" nature, and are also prone to contribute significant effort to issues already legitimized by the total power structure. There is some reason to believe that there is a subsystem of women influentials in every community. To the extent this is true, it will also be important to identify and recognize women of influence and to attempt to appropriately involve them at key stages of an educational effort.

Finally, since top power actors frequently are those persons not holding formal offices, they may not be visible to the general public or to Extension workers. Thus, as Extension moves into new arenas of activity that concern the community power structure, it is important for staff members to have some usable method for identifying the power structure within their communities.

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A STRONG LEADER knows that if he develops his associates he will be even stronger.  
—JAMES F. LINCOLN