

---

## *Power Actors and Social Change*

### *Part II*

RONALD C. POWERS

*Key individuals in a community power structure can significantly affect community decisions and subsequent social actions. If an adult educator is to enlist the cooperation of these "power actors," he must first identify them. Such an identification technique is presented in this article. The author briefly reviews and appraises the various methods used to determine community power actors, and presents a modified technique that Extension personnel can use to identify power actors in their communities.*

COMMUNITY decisions and subsequent social actions are significantly affected by the actions of a numerical minority of citizens. These persons, referred to variously as decision makers, power actors, key influentials, and legitimizers, possess and exercise social power. They may act in concert on major community issues or through "linked" cliques of individuals who specialize by issue areas. Individuals in the community power structure frequently determine which issues will be brought before the public—if public participation is needed or required.

Generalizations which can be derived from social power research were discussed in some detail in Part I of this article.<sup>1</sup> One generalization suggested that power actors frequently are not those individuals incumbent in formal positions of authority, such as county and city officials, agency administrators, and local voluntary association officers. This does not mean that persons holding formal positions can or should be ignored in the initiation of social action. It does imply that legitimation or sanction that can be given by these persons is a necessary but not sufficient condition for legitimizing social action.

The need for seeking the legitimation and sanction of informal

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronald C. Powers, "Power Actors and Social Change—Part I," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, V (Fall, 1967), 153-63.

RONALD C. POWERS is Head, Department of Family Environment, and Professor of Sociology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

leaders, or persons of substantial influence, suggests the need for an identification technique. Moreover, the technique must be fairly simple, reasonably accurate, quick, and acceptable to interviewers and interviewees alike, if it is to be useful to Extension staff members.

The main purposes of this discussion are to: (1) briefly review and appraise the various techniques used to identify community power actors, and (2) present and illustrate a modified technique that Extension staff members can use to identify community power actors.

#### TECHNIQUES OF IDENTIFICATION

Three major techniques have been used to identify community power actors.<sup>2</sup> In several instances these have been used independently. More recently, two or three techniques are combined:

1. *Positional technique*: This requires identifying those individuals in the community who are in a position to exercise power. In practice this amounts to listing the persons in formal positions—especially public offices. A substantial amount of research has demonstrated, however, that this technique does not identify all the persons most influential in community affairs, that is, those able to affect the outcome of most community issues.

2. *Decisional technique*: This technique, most often used by political scientists, is sometimes referred to as event analysis. Basically, the researcher determines the persons actually involved in several community issues that have occurred recently—or preferably are in process at the time of the research. Persons “involved” are those making public statements, voting to do something, attending meetings, and the like. The major shortcoming of the technique is that it does not search out persons acting “behind the scenes.” In addition, the opportunity to observe several community issues covering a wide range of interests is difficult to come by—even for the researcher with time, energy, and money. Furthermore, such a procedure would tend to reveal more *implementors* of decisions than *initiators* of decisions. While implementors are important to the ultimate outcome, they do not play the key role of legitimation.

3. *Reputational technique*: In this approach, most often used by sociologists, a list of community power actors is obtained by asking a number of knowledgeable community residents to name and rank

<sup>2</sup>See Wendell Bell, Richard J. Hill, and Charles R. Wright, *Public Leadership* (San Francisco, California: Chandler Publishing Co., 1960), for a more complete discussion of the identification technique.

those persons reputed (perceived) to have the most social power. Usually information is sought on several issues (such as health, education, and industrial development) which may have arisen within the last two to five years.

The reputational approach usually involves two major steps. The first step is to interview several knowledgeable (sometimes called a panel), obtaining their perceptions of who are the influential persons in the community. These data are then summarized and at the second step, all the persons who have been named two or more times, for example, are interviewed to obtain *their* ranking of the persons already named. Each is given the opportunity to add others they perceive to have equal or greater social power than they have. Social scientists have labeled this two-step procedure and variations of it the "snowball" or "cobweb" technique. The study of social power by this reputational technique may identify past, present, or anticipated power.

The validity of these last two techniques—the decisional and reputational—has been the subject of much controversy among social scientists. The general tenor of discussion now is that the use of both methods, along with data from the positional approach, is most satisfactory for research purposes.<sup>3</sup>

#### A TECHNIQUE FOR EXTENSION AGENTS

Community change agents, such as Extension staff members, welfare workers, and school administrators, are generally aware of the need for legitimizing proposed courses of change with the key influentials. These change agents are less aware of the variations which may prevail in community power structures, such as the different persons who may play key roles as issues change.

Furthermore, most change agents are not familiar with techniques they can use to identify these key people. Research workers in the field of community power research generally have been of little assistance. To begin with, they rarely publish the questionnaires used in their research. And many questions of interest to the researcher are inappropriate for the change agent seeking to identify power actors.

What, then, are the requirements of an identification technique

<sup>3</sup> See particularly Robert Presthus, *Men at the Top* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), for a discussion on the use of techniques in combination. See also Baha Abu-Laban, "The Reputational Approach in the Study of Community Power," *Pacific Sociological Review*, VIII (Spring, 1965), 35-42, for a reasoned defense of the reputational approach.

that can be used by the Extension worker who is characterized by: (1) little if any background in either sociology or social science research procedures; (2) a continuing contact and relationship with the very people being questioned and identified (i.e., he lives in the community); and (3) a minimum of time for data collection?

At a minimum, the technique should fulfill the following conditions:

1. It should be limited in scope to the areas of information useful to the ongoing extension program and not elaborate enough to fulfill basic research objectives.
2. The technique should be reasonably reliable and valid, that is, accurate in identifying the power actors.
3. The method must be straightforward in the steps required for gathering data, formulating questions, summarizing the information, and interpreting the findings.

There are some *minimums* which an Extension staff member can use to increase his knowledge of his community. First, armed with the generalizations discussed in Part I, he can attempt to systematically observe who the decision makers are for various issue areas. This requires access to the real decision-making arenas of the community. Many Extension workers do not have such access.

Second, a staff member can identify all the formal position leaders in the community in civic and social agencies and in organizations related to education, health, government, business, religion, and politics. Persons in formal authority positions are important to community action and usually must be approached at a fairly early stage of a social action project. Research data show, however, that it would be an error to assume that these are the most important people in legitimizing major community projects.

Third, a staff member can prepare a set of specific questions aimed at identifying power actors, but instead of using a written questionnaire to interview a limited and selected number of community knowledgeable, he can informally ask such questions of many persons in the community and record the data after the informal "interview." Much useful data can be gathered in this manner if the staff member asks the same questions from several people in a relatively short time and accurately records the data, and if some notation is made regarding the "position" of each respondent so that some estimate of his community knowledge can be made. It is really important that persons using this approach write down the data they secure. Otherwise, the selective perception process of the

staff member will overestimate the number of times some people are named and underestimate the number of times that others are suggested.

Fourth, a written questionnaire using one or two questions can be used. For example, "Who are the ten most influential people in this community?" and "What are the most serious problems this community faces today?" Such an approach is useful in acquainting the staff member with knowledgeable and possible power actors in his community. Since power actors tend to specialize by issue area, this technique is less than satisfactory for determining who runs the community. This two-question method may be important and useful in making contacts and starting to sound out people about their response to such proposals as resource development. It does not substitute for the information that can be gathered by a technique which will be suggested later.

All of the above techniques are possibilities for gaining additional insight into the dynamics of a community and its decision-making processes. They are not likely to be sufficient in providing the kind of "hard" data needed for a wide range of community issues. In each case there are several opportunities for staff biases to be reinforced. The technique which follows has been field tested by several Extension staff members with satisfactory results to date.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF POWER ACTORS

The first step in identifying power actors is to determine the relevant geographical area (the area in which the issues to be studied will be resolved). Usually this is a community, which normally includes the population center and a surrounding rural area determined by the primary retail trade area. The trade area is approximated by noting where farm people stop coming to the population center under study and start going to another. Other boundaries could be the school district or the area in which people go to church.

There may be several population centers within a county. Experience to date would show that if an Extension worker wants a clear picture of the power structure in his county, he has to study each of the community centers, since power structures focus upon community centers and not the county line. The only aspect of social power which tends to correspond to county lines is that of political parties, since political parties historically have organized themselves by county lines. The past history of cooperation or conflict between communities will determine to some extent whether or not the power actors in the respective communities have been and are

communication with each other and know each person's role in the wider community.

### *The Issue Area*

The second step in identifying power actors is to define the issue areas to be studied. "Issue areas" are those areas of interest or concern, such as health, education, industrial development, recreation, and low income. To keep the identification technique within bounds, it is suggested that no more than four different issues be studied at one time in a community. Consequently—as will be elaborated later—we would ask a question regarding persons most influential in general community affairs, followed by no more than three specific issue areas. These issue areas may be stated in terms of a broad range of projects and programs, such as health, or of a specific program or project, such as a hospital bond issue.

### *The Questionnaire*

The third step is to develop the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire is what might be called the "approach" to the person who will be interviewed. This would include introduction of one's self and position, the rationale for asking these questions, intended use of the data obtained, and a query as to whether the respondent has any questions. The following method, in outline style, could be used to approach the person to be interviewed:

1. Introduce self, explain affiliation with Extension Service and the state university.
2. State reasons for the study:
  - Knowledge of leadership patterns useful in Extension education.
  - Successful community action depends upon involvement of key people.
  - Main purpose—to improve understanding of community leadership and organizations.
3. Give reasons for interview:
  - Believe that your position (occupation, experience) in the community provides the opportunity to observe community leaders.
4. State use of information:
  - The information you provide will not be reported to others in any way to identify you as the source.
  - The information obtained from respondents will increase my understanding of community leadership.
5. Ask if there are any questions before proceeding.

The second task is to formulate the specific questions to be asked. Experience has shown that a good place to begin the interview is by asking the individual to indicate his knowledge and perception about those community organizations and groups which play a major role in community affairs. This begins to set a frame of reference for the respondent and starts him thinking about the way things get done in his community. Also, it does not require him to immediately name individuals. Such a question might be stated as follows:

As I indicated, I would like to ask several questions about community leaders and groups. Just so we understand what we are talking about, "community" means this town plus the surrounding area from which people come to purchase groceries, repairs, fertilizer, and the like, as well as go to church or school. There are many organizations and groups that exist in a community.

- In your opinion, which are the five most influential groups or organizations in this community?
- In your opinion, who are the two most influential people in each of the groups you have named?

Then a set of questions must be designed to obtain information regarding the respondent's perception of persons he believes to be most influential in getting things done in that community. An example of how this might be approached follows:

There are many individuals who play an important role in community decisions and issues. Some people can influence community members to support a project, while others may be able to influence people to reject a proposal. Considering the general affairs of the community (industrial development, hospital expansion, school organization, recreation programs, Community Chest, etc.):

- Who are the five people you believe are most influential (carry the most weight) in this community; that is, who can make the project go or, if opposed, probably stop it?
- How would you rank them?
- What are their occupations?
- What is the major reason you have named each person?

The precise phrasing of every question must be adapted to the locality in which the agent lives. Phrases and terminology vary from one locality to another.

One criticism directed at the research and techniques for identifying power actors is the inattention given to identifying women who play a role in community affairs. Nearly all community power research substantiates the generalization that those perceived to be

most influential are predominately men. This fact notwithstanding, it does seem relevant in the process of identifying key people to determine, if possible, what women do play a major role in community affairs. A suggested question would be as follows:

Considering women only, in regard to the general affairs of this community:

- Who are the five most influential women in the community?
- In what area are they most influential (health, education, culture, welfare, business, etc.)?
- What offices or positions do they hold in organizations or groups of the community?

Questions must then be formulated for whatever issue areas are of most concern to the Extension staff member. He must phrase the question in terms understood by respondents in his community. The format is the same as suggested for the previous questions. For example, if we are interested in determining which persons are most influential in the issue area of education, we might ask:

Considering a more specific community issue such as education (school reorganization, bond issues, special educational facilities, and the like):

- Who are the five persons you believe to be most influential in this community in such programs or projects?
- How would you rank them?
- What is the major reason you named each of these people?

In general, it is also important to record a few facts about the person who provides the data. Such facts will help the interviewer understand whether or not the persons selected as knowledgeable are in as good a position to know and see the community in action as had been expected. Information might include: name, occupation, address, sex (male, female), years lived in community, years of formal education (8 or less, 9-12, 13-16, 17 or more), organizational history (organizations belonged to, per cent attendance, offices held, number of years), and any other pertinent interviewer notes.

#### *Selecting the Knowledgeables*

The fourth step in the identification procedure is to select a number of knowledgeable to be interviewed. It is important to interview individuals who by virtue of their occupations are likely to have an opportunity to see, hear, and know a good deal about the community. Knowledgeables should be selected from different com-

munity sectors such as business, government, education, religion, and politics. In addition, at least two should be women.

The number of knowledgeable to be interviewed depends somewhat on the size of community studied. As a working guideline we can use the following:

<u>Size of Community</u>	<u>Number of Knowledgeables to Interview</u>
250- 1,000	5
1,001- 2,500	7
2,501- 5,000	8
5,001- 10,000	10
10,001-100,000	15

If the list of persons named as power actors is not duplicated several times after the suggested number of knowledgeable have been interviewed, it may be necessary to select and interview more knowledgeable. The likelihood of this occurring is fairly small if the original knowledgeable have been chosen with care (i.e., if they actually are knowledgeable). An exception would be in the case of communities characterized by segmented power structures, such as those divided along the lines of labor/management or Protestant/Catholic. Whenever such splits occur, it is necessary to add knowledgeable until the names mentioned definitely cluster around the dimensions of the split, such as one cluster for liberals and another for conservatives.

#### *Agent's Perception*

After developing the questionnaire and selecting knowledgeable, the staff member should first fill out the questionnaire himself. By so doing, he increases the number of questionnaires by one, puts down his own perceptions before he has a chance to be biased, and "pretests" the questionnaire. Wherever more than one staff member is involved in identifying power actors, each interviewer should fill out a questionnaire before talking to others. Or, if he would like to get a feel of the interview situation, he could actually interview another staff member.

#### *Interviewing the Knowledgeables*

The staff member should call and arrange for a specific time to interview the person. The "approach" or introduction suggested earlier can be used to set up the interview by telephone or in a face

to-face situation. It is important not to underestimate the amount of time necessary to complete the questionnaire. Experience has shown that most respondents become so interested in the questions being asked that they themselves will extend the interview. However, as a matter of good relations, it is important to honestly admit that it may take a half hour or an hour, rather than suggesting only 15 minutes when this will definitely not be the case.

In small communities, it is quite likely that some of the knowledgeable interviewed are also power actors. Such overlap is unavoidable. It does not constitute any major problem. One technique recommended in such cases is to inquire of every knowledgeable as to whether he believes that he would also be included among those persons he has named as influential, unless he has already named himself.

#### *Summarizing the Data*

After all the knowledgeable have been interviewed, a summary is made of the names of persons mentioned as power actors for each issue area, including general affairs. The number of mentions for each person is recorded. The "pool of power actors" is made up of those individuals named several times. For example, if we interviewed five to eight knowledgeable, we would probably retain the names of all persons named two or more times for each issue area. If we interviewed a greater number, we might retain as our pool of power actors only those persons named three or more times. We assume that the individuals with the most "votes" in each issue area are the top power actors for that area. Such a procedure does not establish a breaking point between those persons who have power and those who do not. It simply identifies those persons perceived as most influential by knowledgeable in that community. In the execution of various social action projects, it is likely that not only will the top power actors be involved in legitimizing the project, but that many of those persons named only a few times can become active participants in executing such a project.

#### *Checking Reliability*

Once the data have been summarized, it is necessary to check the reliability of the list. One method is to interview the two or three persons named most frequently, asking the same questions that have been asked of the knowledgeable. If the information from the knowledgeable has been reasonably accurate, the answers obtained

from these persons should closely duplicate the list already obtained. If additional names are suggested by more than one of these persons, we include the names in the power pool, particularly if they have been previously mentioned by at least one knowledgeable.

#### SUMMARY

At this point we will have identified the power actors, i.e., the community power pool. If we have collected information on several issue areas, the results will indicate the degree to which there is specialization by issue area in the community.

If a summary of the data from knowledgeable shows that no individuals are named significantly more times than others, we would normally interview additional knowledgeable to see whether or not we could change this situation. If not, there may be unique factors in the community which suggest that the power structure is not coalesced to the degree that it is identifiable by knowledgeable. In such cases, it is suggested that the staff member seek advice from a person who may be familiar with this field of research.

Since the "membership" of the community power structure is dynamic, it will be necessary to update the list every two to five years. If completely different issues arise from those studied, it may also be necessary to supplement one's knowledge with a special or short-form study.

Finally, the technique outlined above only identifies the power actors. It does not indicate the power structure, i.e., the interaction pattern which exists. These data can be filled in by the agent through observations and judicious questioning in informal situations.

---

POSSIBLY THE GREATEST SERVICE a university can perform for society is to make that society humbly aware of how inadequate a university education really is; that the pursuit of education is but a never-ceasing process of which the traditional collegiate period is simply an early segment in the continuum; that the real bounds of education are coterminous with life itself. In brief, we must rid ourselves of what John Mason Brown declares is part of the American myth by which "We expect the skin of a dead sheep to keep the mind alive forever."  
—LOWELL EKLUND