A-Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Family Life:

The Nature and Extent of Changes Within the Family Group (3)

A. The Concept of Power

1. The concept of power is a central one in sociology (as it is, of course, in life generally). Whilst we will be discussing this concept in greater detail in the Power and Politics section of the syllabus, the work we've just done in relation to gender relationships gives us the opportunity to show how the concept of power can be applied to explanations as to why broad forms of gender relationships have tended to remain relatively fixed in our society (and also to explain how they might change).

2. Two definitions of power:

- Giddens ("Sociology"):
  "By power is meant the ability of individuals or groups to make their own concerns or interests count, even where others resist. Power sometimes involves the direct use of force, but is almost always also accompanied by the development of ideas (ideology) which justify the actions of the powerful.".
- Max Weber:
  "Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.".

  Another way of expressing the above is that power represents the ability to get your own way, even if your "power" is simply based upon bluff...

3. The concepts of power, politics, authority and ideology are linked thus:

- "Political behaviour" covers almost all forms of human social interaction - from Parliaments and political parties, through social systems characterised by notions of dictatorship / democracy, to interpersonal relationships such as that between an employer / employee, parent / child, teacher / student.

- "Politics", in this respect, is a concept that is:
  "A process involving the exercise of control, constraint and coercion in society".

- Any social relation involves some form of political relationship between the participants because all such relationships involve a concept of power - whether that power is openly displayed or obscured from view. Any process that involves some attempt to control the behaviour of others (whether or not it is successful) is one that is based upon power and, by extension, is political in character.

- In addition, for any social process of interaction to take place, it must be guided by some form of ideology (ideological framework of belief about "what is going on").

- The vast majority of our social relationships - whilst underpinned by some concept of power - involve a more-subtle form of social control, namely "authority". In this respect, people comply with the wishes of others not because they are threatened or forced, but because they see the power of the person making a demand as legitimate - that the person making a demand has a right and proper expectation that their command will be obeyed.

4. An example of the inter-relationship between the concepts of power, politics, authority and ideology might be as follows:

- The relationship between an employer and an employee is a political one, because it is based upon a particular form of ideological framework (Capitalism).

- The ideology of capitalism specifies the basic or general form of this relationship. The employer, for example, buys the labour power of the employee and it is the nature of this basic form of relationship which makes Capitalism, for example, different to slavery (since, under Capitalism the employer does not own his / her employee).

- Political behaviour, in the above respect, represents the real, everyday, form which the relationship between an employer / employee takes.

Power is involved in the sense that the employer exercises power over the employee in the workplace. The nature of their political relationship specifies the broad nature of their power relationship.

- In one sense, this is a political relationship underpinned by some form of coercive power - the employer can make the employee do certain things that may be against his / her will to resist. However, a better way of looking at this political relationship is to see it in terms of authority (the legal / rational type).

- The employee, for example, obeys commands given by an employer:

    a. Because the nature of their (contractual) relationship effectively gives the employer the power to exercise command.

    b. The employee recognises that the employer has a legitimate expectation that commands will / should be obeyed.

    c. The power of the employer, however, comes from the office that he / she holds. The employee, for example, would not be forced to recognise the authority of the employer outside the workplace. Similarly, certain commands would not be seen as the legitimate exercising of power, even within the workplace. For example, it would not be seen as a legitimate form of power for an employer to command an employee to break the law.

    Power, in this sense, is seen as legitimate only within the particular political relationship that specifies the form that this power should take. Once that relationship ends (the employee leaves his / her place of work, for example) so the power of the employer over the employee ceases to operate.

5. To link all of the above, we can note that:

- Ideology specifies the general form of a social relationship.
  For example, the ideology of Capitalism is different to the ideology of Feudalism or Slavery. Under each system, a different form (or forms) of social relationship apply.
- Politics specifies the specific form of a social relationship.
  For example, the relationship between one employer / employee may be based upon mutual trust, mutual like, mutual dependence, whilst the relationship between another employer / employee may be based upon mutual need, suspicion, dislike and so forth.
- Power underpins the form taken by any given social relationship.
- Authority legitimates that relationship, such that the participants see their relationship as right and proper.

6. It is possible to analyse any form of social relationship (such as those that exist within a family group) in the above way. As another example, we can understand these concepts "in reverse":

- A husband, for example, gets his power, in part, from the dependent nature of his wife. The latter depends upon the former for economic resources (food, shelter and so forth) and this dependence involves the ability, on the part of the husband, to apply sanctions, both positive and negative, to his wife.

- Relationships based purely upon coercion are inherently unstable, since they involve a constant battle between the person doing the coercing and the person being coerced.

- Thus, naked forms of coercion tended, ultimately, to be self-defeating, since they explicitly encourage the coerced to:

    a. Recognise the fact of their subservience.
    b. Take steps to confront - and thereby eliminate - the power of others.

7. A more successful way of wielding power is to secure the "co-operation" of those you want to obey your commands (power seen in terms of authority), since the exercise of power becomes "transparent" (that is, whilst power is being wielded, it is not seen as such by the person being commanded).

    By convincing the subject of your power that your relationship is good, right and proper, compliance can be achieved without repeated confrontations. Co-operation can be secured without the subject of your power "realising" that power is being wielded.

- In this respect, ideology comes into play because it is through ideology that the powerful are able to persuade the powerless that their subordinate position is normal, natural and right - that the powerful have a right to command and influence.

B. Power In The Family

1. How do men ensure that women do most of the domestic labour within the family?

- Coercion:
    Although male violence against women within the family is common within our society, men do not always need to force women to do domestic labour.

- Charisma:
    Whilst some form of charismatic attraction between the sexes might exist at various points in their relationship ("falling in love" for example), this does not constitute a particularly useful explanation in this context.

- Traditional:
    This aspect of authority is clearly significant in this context, since the balance of power between males and females is partly based upon traditional forms of social relationship - women have "always" been the domestic labourer, men have "always" been the breadwinners (except, of course, that this is not actually true - it just appears to be true).

- Legal / Rational:
    In tandem with tradition, a significant aspect of the power relationship within the family is based upon this form of authority. People see it as "right and proper" that domestic labour is mainly "female work". Women, in this respect, do not have to be openly forced to do domestic labour. The force of their socialisation leads them to internalise ideas about the role of women, the role of men and so forth, that leads "naturally" to their primary social role of domestic labourer.

2. The main idea in the above is that the concept of power is always based on some form of social relationship which, in turn, always involves some form of inequality.

C. Operationalising The Concept of Power

1. To help us operationalise the concept of power, we can adopt Stephen Lukes' argument that the exercising of power has three main dimensions:

- The ability to make decisions.
- The ability to prevent others making decisions.
- The ability to remove decision-making from the agenda (to prevent others making decisions by convincing them a decision doesn't need to be made).

2. The exercising of power is always done within a social context and in our society we can see this context in terms of:

    a. Work is organised in a particular way in Capitalist societies.
    b. Power comes from the ability to control valuable social resources (knowledge, people, machines, etc.).
    c. The ability of the individual to exploit this control over resources:
- The Capitalist exploits their control over labour power for private gain.
- Men exploit women's biological "disadvantage" (considered only in terms of the way in which work is organised in industrial societies).

3. Men have a power advantage over women because they are better-placed to exploit their control over valued social resources. Lukes' dimensions of power help to

explain how men exploit their control over women on both an individual and institutional level in relation to family life.

4. "Decision-making" and family life involves a complex interplay between the "private domain" (the domestic sphere involving specific relationships within a family group) and the "public domain" (the spheres of work, industry, politics and so forth).
The distinction between the "private domain" and the "public domain "is useful for a number of reasons:

- To exercise power, need access to sources of power. The greater the access to (and control over) a variety of sources, the greater your level of power.

- The major sources of power in our society originate in the public domain. It is here that we find resources such as economic ownership, wealth and wages from which significant levels of power derive.

- Public domain power sources are comprehensive and wide-ranging (control over production resources, ideological resources, political resources, etc.). Decision-making in this sphere also affects large numbers of people.

- Private domain power sources are more-specific and focused upon a particular set of social relationships. Decision-making in this sphere affects relatively small numbers of people.

5. In basic terms:

- If your social existence involves access to both domains, the greater are your chances of having access to multiple power resources.

- The private domain is structurally dependent on the public domain in industrial societies, since in order for the private domain to function it requires the provision of various resources from the public domain.

D. Dimensions of Power and Family Life.

1. The Ability To Make Decisions.

- Women do exercise power within families, but mainly in areas where they are traditionally seen to have greater expertise and control over resources within this private domain. Decisions affecting the family group's relationship with wider social institutions tend to be monopolised by men, mainly because men's lives involve experience of both private and public domains. Their greater experience, knowledge and control over resources gives them this power.

- Where both partners work, women have more control over the wider decision-making process (this supports the idea that power is dependent upon control over a wide range of social resources). This depends upon such things as the status of female work, relative level of income, domestic responsibilities and so forth.

2. The Ability To Prevent Others Making Decisions...

- This second dimension of power involves the "ability to manipulate any debate over the kinds of decisions that actually reach the stage of 'being made'".

- In terms of gender roles and relationships within a family, the life-histories of the participants are important (for example, the role expectations each partner brings into the family group). Gender socialisation is significant, since if males and females are raised to have certain expectations of both their own social role and that of their partner then the ability to make decisions affecting the family group takes on the appearance of a "natural" quality. It appears "right, proper and natural" for women to raise children and men to have paid employment, for example.

- In the above respect, decisions about these respective roles never reach the stage of actually having to be made, since each partner in the relationship has certain socially-produced expectations about male and female roles.

3. The Ability To Remove Decision-Making From The Agenda...

- This dimension relates to the second dimension (and, by extension, the first) in that it involves the idea that basic forms of gender relationships (who does what and when they do it inside and outside of the family group, for example) are conditioned by various social factors (gender socialisation, social ideologies surrounding male and female behaviour and "nature", power distributions in society and the like) that reflect our experiences in and of the social world.

    For example, the cosy and convenient (male, and to an extent female) assumption that women are better child-rearers than men is an example of this "removal of decision-making" from the family (political) agenda.

- In relation to the above point we find one of the major planks in radical feminist arguments, namely that patriarchal assumptions about gender roles are highly significant in the explanation of these role relationships.