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by  
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Identifying the

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# COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE



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## Preface

Research has shown that successful community social action efforts depend on the appropriate involvement of key leaders in the community. These individuals, by virtue of their position in the community, are able to strongly influence most community decisions involving issues such as industrial development, recreational facilities, hospitals and school reorganization.

Knowledge of and about these prime movers of community change is essential to all persons charged with the responsibility of initiating change. Among such persons are ministers, teachers, extension workers and executive secretaries of chambers of commerce, industrial corporations and charitable organizations.

This bulletin draws upon research and experience in presenting a technique for identifying the key influentials or power actors in a community. In addition, several generalizations about social power and power actors are included to provide a better understanding of the role they play in community decision-making.

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## Introduction

Research has shown that social systems of all types—family, organization, community, political party, etc.—have individuals who predominate in the decision-making of that system. These individuals—referred to variously as power actors, key leaders, influentials and legitimizers—can and do influence the changes to be made in the social system. They do this by exercising their social power. The manner in which power actors react to proposed changes often depends upon (1) *what* the proposal involves, (2) *when* they were informed, (3) *how* they were informed and (4) *who* informed them.

Most agents of change, such as the extension worker, the teacher and the minister, are aware that certain members of the community play more important roles than others in the process of community decision-making. When community social action projects initiated by change agents fail, they are often made painfully aware that they did not recognize and/or appropriately involve the key people in the community power structure.

The failure to involve such persons might occur for several reasons.

A change agent concerned primarily with one segment of the community, such as agriculture, may not know the key people in other segments. Even though the change agent may have identified several key people in the agricultural sector, the key people

among farmers are not necessarily the key people throughout all community sectors.

Failures in community social action may also result when change agents from outside the community do not identify and contact the key people at the early stages of the project. Or they may fail to acknowledge the role of key people in decision-making.

Of course, community action projects may fail for several reasons other than failure to involve community power actors. The people may not agree with the proposal, or they may not understand it.

The change agent who has a basic understanding of social power, and who can identify the individual power actors in the community, can enhance his opportunity for success in social action efforts.

The primary purpose of this publication is to outline a technique which can be used to identify community power actors. "Community" is generally defined in this publication as a population center and the area surrounding it that makes up its primary trade and service area.

In addition, we will discuss several generalizations regarding social power and power actors as a background to the identification technique. This combination of technique and basic understanding of social power should increase the effectiveness of identification as well as provide some insights for social action by the change agent.

# Social Power

Social power is generally defined as "the capacity to control the actions of others."<sup>1</sup> However, there isn't as much agreement on the bases or sources of an individual's social power as on the general definition.

Much recent research has been directed at determining the individual power actor's bases of social power. The general categories of authority and influence have been widely used to describe an individual's power base. Thus, it is suggested that one part of the individual's power is due to the authority he holds. **Authority** is the right to control others. Any person holding an "office" of an elective or appointive nature has the authority of that office. The authority is determined by the members and is the same no matter who holds the office, unless changed by the members. Presidents of the United States all have had the same authority but have differed in their personal influence.

**Influence** is that part of a person's power attributable to his control of, or access to, resources relevant to the proposed social action. Influence resides in the individual on the basis of his own facilities or abilities. It may be due to such factors as skill in guiding and directing people, reciprocal obligation, specialized knowledge, reputation, wealth, and control of, or access to, resources such as credit and jobs.

The bases of influence cover a wide range. On the one hand, an individual may be influenced by another because of respect or personal attachment. On the other hand, an individual may be influenced by another person under the feeling of an implied threat, such as loss of job or promotion.

An individual may exercise power over others in still another way: through **unlegitimized coercion**. Obtaining money at gunpoint would be an example.

These three components of power (authority, influence and unlegitimized coercion) can account for any action on the part of any individual or group in response to any action by any other individual or group. We will focus our attention on the first two aspects of power, authority and influence, because research efforts up to this time have not attempted to identify cases of unlegitimized coercion.

When we divide a person's power into the components of authority and influence, there is a special need to find out more about the **bases of influence**, in order that the bases of power may be specified beyond the general category of influence. The process of identification of power actors and of deriving implications for agents of change depends on the possibility of this specification.

Thus, identifying authority and influence is the first step we take to describe the power base of power actors.

As we discuss the generalizations in the following section, we will summarize the research findings to indicate what is now known about influence in particular.

## GENERALIZATIONS

The following generalizations are based on the research of sociologists and political scientists. The communities studied varied in size, location, economic base and cultural background. These statements, like any scientific propositions, may be amended or refined by future research. Until we have better information, it seems appropriate to use the knowledge we have as operating guidelines regarding the role of social power and power actors in the arena of community action.

**Existence and Exercise of Power.** Social power exists and is exercised in every social system. This twofold generalization has usually been assumed in social power research. It has been supported in all cases where it has been tested. This might seem obvious—perhaps even a truism—but it is nonetheless important, as it is basic to all of the other generalizations and findings concerning social power. Its signal value may be in dispelling the notion that there are no power actors just because they are difficult to identify.

**Power Structure.** A second generalization derives from the manner in which the individual power actors in any social system relate to each other. In all social power research, it has been found that power actors do relate to each other and thereby constitute a power structure. The relationship of individual power actors to each other when they act in concert can vary, however, from one community to another and also within a single community over time. Research in community power has led to the postulation of several types of power structure. Intensive study and the collection of certain information are the only means for specifying the structure which exists in any given community. We will note this as we discuss techniques of identification.

Some communities appear to have a power structure centered in **one person**. He is surrounded by "lieutenants." This would be expected where one family has been dominant for generations or where a person or company "owns" the town, as in the case of a one-industry community.

Other communities may have a small, **tightly knit group**—the power elite—that controls policy-making for the community. The members of this power group may be the local aristocracy.

A third type of structure is the **"split community."** Examples of such splits are: Republican-Democrat, Protestant-Catholic, liberal-conservative, labor-man-

<sup>1</sup> Loomis, Charles P. *Social Systems*. Princeton, New Jersey, D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1960, p. 20.

agement, rural-urban, white-colored, union-nonunion, and native-migrant. A separate power structure develops for each segment. The form of the structure within each segment may be any of the other types described.

We frequently see another type of structure, the "power pool." It involves several aspects of the structures already described. Essentially, there is a "pool" of 10 to 25 persons who are the top community power actors. Within this more or less loosely-knit group, there may be some specialization or structuring by issue area, depending upon the issue under consideration. A study of specific issues will find that all power actors are not at the decision-making core. Perhaps only three or four of the total group act on any given issue.

As an example, in a community with a power pool of 20 individuals, we may find five at the decision-making core of a health issue, such as a hospital building proposal. Examination of another issue, such as school reorganization, may also find five people at the decision-making core. Of the five in each issue, perhaps only two are involved in both issues. One reason for such specialization is that different issues require different resources for their solution. Thus, the power actors with the appropriate resources and/or interests become involved. There have been successful initial research attempts to verify the relationship between the power actors' resources (bases of power) and the resources needed to resolve the issue.

An important related finding regarding this generalization concerns the size of the community. Evidence presently available suggests that specialization by issue area among power actors **decreases** as community size decreases. Thus, in small communities (apparently of about 1,500 population or less), it is quite possible that most of the power actors will be involved in all significant community issues. As power actors themselves have observed, there aren't enough people with the necessary skills and resources in a small community to afford the luxury of specialization.

In light of the mounting evidence, it is likely that the power pool is the more frequent kind of power structure found. The other structures are special cases, found in communities with unique characteristics. The power pool structure has at least the following implications for change agents:

1. The same power actors may not be relevant to every issue; thus, the power actors need to be identified relative to each issue.
2. There are communication networks within the pool. Thus, a discussion with one or more power actors provides a secondary means for communicating a message to several other power actors. It also provides a means for communicating to other people in the community.
3. Members of the power pool change over time. Furthermore, the power of one individual relative to another may change. As a consequence, the identification and assessment of power actors cannot be viewed as a one-time task.

**Authority and Influence.** The top power actors do not usually hold positions of formal authority within the community. Generally, an individual's current social power is inversely related to current positions of authority. That is, the top power actors' power is more likely to be based on their influence than on authority or formal position. Other studies have reached the same general conclusion by suggesting that one would have less than a 50-50 chance of identifying the top power actors in a community through the process of listing those individuals who currently hold positions of formal authority in the community. It has been demonstrated, however, that top power actors **generally have been active** in formal organizations within the past 5 to 15 years.

Because influence is the most important contributor to the power of an individual, we must look at the influence component if we are to specify empirically the bases of influence. The following specifications of bases of influence should be viewed as tentative. They represent only initial efforts to go beyond the authority-influence division.

Studies of rural communities indicate the following factors as bases for influence and, consequently, as bases for power: past achievements, source of ideas, human relations skills, contact with others (in and outside of community), access to needed resources, influence within community organizations, family background, past participation in community groups, length of residence in community, age, occupation, education and control of jobs, wealth, credit and mass media.

Control of credit or jobs may involve an authority position such as bank president or manufacturing plant manager. These are exceptions to the general statement that top power actors do not hold formal authority positions. The editor or director of mass media would be in a similar position. These positions of authority probably are of a different order than positions in service, social and civic groups. Tentative evidence would suggest that control of credit, money, jobs and mass media is a very important authority component when combined with the other bases of influence previously noted.

**Characteristics of Power Actors.** The studies of community social power are in general accord that power actors usually are:

1. Persons 50 years old and over.
2. In the higher income group in the community.
3. In a position of having control of, or access to, the resources of credit, money, jobs and mass media by virtue of their position in credit institutions, firms employing several people, mass media and/or elective offices.
4. Above average in education for their age peers.

5. In occupations described as self-employed, owner or executive.
6. Long-time residents of the community.

**Routes to Power.** Some studies have focused on the route to power. These studies have tried to find out if current power actors "see" a series of steps or role performances which must be taken by people aspiring to positions of power. At a tentative level again, some studies have identified the following steps for a would-be power actor. He must (1) be active in community affairs, i.e., be willing to do "leg-work" for a variety of community projects; (2) be financially successful in his own business; (3) check out ideas for community change or projects with current power actors; (4) be trustworthy and dependable in dealing with others; (5) join the "right" groups and (6) get elected to office in these groups.

Acceptance of these findings should further verify the companion generalization noted earlier that current power actors **have been** active in community affairs,

**have been** members of community groups, and **have held** positions of formal authority in these groups.

#### A SPECIAL NOTE

In general, public professionals, such as teachers, ministers, extension workers and agency heads, are not among the top power actors in the community. In many cases, they do not know who the power actors are. Furthermore, they may not have ready access to power actors from the standpoint of being able to seek their sanction or approval on a specific project. Because of this situation, it is particularly important that such persons understand the methods available for identifying power actors.

Several methods can be used to **identify the persons who are the power actors**. Following an examination of some of these methods, we will spell out in detail the suggested steps to use in one particular identification method.

## Identifying Power Actors

Three major methods or techniques for identifying power actors have been used in studying community power. The first method involves identifying those individuals who have the **potential** for power. Persons with potential power are those holding formal **positions** in the community. As indicated in the foregoing discussion, this method is generally not satisfactory, because there is little relationship between persons holding formal positions and the persons who actually have the most power in the community.

The second method involves the study of **actual events** or **decisions** to determine who has been the most influential in determining the outcome of the events or decisions. This technique is time-consuming. In addition, it assumes that the power actors visibly "do something." The power actors may or may not take "visible" actions.

The third method involves the identification of individuals **reputed** to have power by other community members and is referred to as the **reputational technique**.

There have been arguments as to which of these techniques works best. Proponents of each technique only recently have begun to suggest that the best method is probably a combination of all three, particularly the second and third. Several investigators have found that the reputational technique corresponds quite well with the decisional or event technique. Basic research efforts will continue to demand the use of every available technique. As a workable instrument for the change agent who wishes to identify the power actors in a community, the reputational technique can be used by itself.

Past experience has shown that change agents do gain new insights into the process of community decision-making if they follow the steps outlined in the following identification technique. This is particularly true if the change agent previously has been concerned with only one major segment of the community, such as agriculture, religion or education.

#### STEPS IN THE REPUTATIONAL TECHNIQUE

**Defining the Geographical Area.** The first step in identifying power actors is to identify the relevant geographical area. The relevant area is the area in which the issue will be resolved. Usually this is a "community." The community includes a population center and a surrounding rural area. The "amount" of rural area is 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. The relevant area could be a school district if we were concerned with a school issue.

If a change agent wants to identify the power structure for a **county**, he will probably have to identify the power actors for each community. There is little evidence to suggest a unified county power structure, except in the case of political party organizations or where a community and a county have common boundaries.

**Defining Issue Areas.** Following the identification of the relevant geographical area, it is next necessary to identify the issue areas of current concern. Examples



of issue areas are education, agriculture, industrial development, health, a program of social and economic development and urban redevelopment. In every case, we should also seek information about those persons who are perceived to have power in the general affairs of the community. Thus, if we want to know who the power actors are in the issue areas of education and industrial development, we would seek information on these two specific issue areas plus the area of general community affairs in our interviewing. We will elaborate on this later.

**Selecting Knowledgeables.** Once the issue area or areas have been selected, we must next select a number of knowledgeable to be interviewed. Knowledgeables will be asked who they think are the community's power actors.

Knowledgeables could include bankers, editors, extension workers, secretaries of chambers of commerce or similar organizations, local government officials and the like. It is important to interview individuals who, by virtue of their occupation, are likely to have an opportunity to see, hear and know a good deal about the various community issues. Generally, we should select the knowledgeable from different community sectors, such as business, government, education, religion and politics.

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

Size of Community	Number of Knowledgeables to Interview
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 will be necessary to identify 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 are actually knowledgeable. An exception would be in the case of communities characterized by "splits," as noted previously. Whenever splits occur, it will be necessary to add knowledgeable until the names of those mentioned definitely cluster around the dimensions of the split, such as one cluster for liberals and another for conservatives.

**Interviewing Knowledgeables.** After identifying the knowledgeable, we must develop the approach and questions to be used in interviewing them. With regard to the approach, or actual contact, it is important to (1) tell the prospective knowledgeable who you are, (2) establish the objective of your interview, (3) state

the reasons you desire this information and (4) tell the person how you will use the information. It is vital to insure the confidential nature of the information which the respondent will give. A logical rationale for seeking this information can be built around the notion that community action depends upon the role of key leaders and that knowledge of leadership patterns, formal and informal, is important to the task of initiating a wide range of actions.

Formulate questions for each of the selected issue areas. A sample question for the area of education: "Who are the persons in this community who have the most influence (carry the most weight, swing a big stick, are the kingpins, can get things done) in educational issues, such as a proposed school bond issue or reorganization?"

A question for determining the reputed power actors in general community affairs might be stated as follows:

"Who are the persons in this community who have the most influence (carry the most weight, swing a big stick, are the kingpins, can get things done) in the general affairs of the community?"

If the respondent asks how many persons you wish named, it is usually best to say, "not more than ten."

We determine the phrase to use, such as "influence," "carries the most weight" or "swings a big stick," by the local word or phrase which conveys the essence of power, i.e., the capacity to control the actions of others.

After the knowledgeable has responded to the question, he (or she) should be asked if he thinks he belongs to the group named. In small communities, it is often hard to avoid some overlap between knowledgeable and power actors. Experience has shown that knowledgeable who are also power actors will usually indicate as much when given the chance.

We should confine the number of issue areas to four or less, including the area of general affairs in the community, to speed up interviewing. A comparison of the names given for one or two specific issue areas and the general affairs area is generally enough to tell us whether or not the power actors specialize by issue area.

In most cases, the questions should be written out with appropriate space to record the names that are given. If respondents are reluctant to give the necessary information because they see you writing it down, it will be necessary to mentally note their responses or take only a few notes and fill in the questionnaire following the interview.

Before the knowledgeable are interviewed, the change agent should write down his own perception of the persons likely to be the power actors in each issue area being studied. He should not, however, include himself in the number of knowledgeable suggested in the table.

**Summarizing.** After all the knowledgeable have been interviewed, we summarize the names of the reputed power actors for each issue area, indicating how many times each one has been named. The pool of power actors is made up of those individuals named several times. When we interview five to eight knowledgeable, we retain the names of all those persons named two or more times for each issue area. If we interview a greater number of knowledgeable, we may retain as the 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 of the community for that issue area. The list of top power actors for all issue areas constitutes the power pool for the community.

**Checking Reliability.** Once this pool of power actors has been identified, it is necessary to check on the reliability of the lists. One method for checking reliability is to go to the two or three persons named most frequently and ask these people the same questions we asked the knowledgeable. If the information from the knowledgeable has been accurate, the answers obtained from these persons should closely duplicate the list we already have. If additional names are suggested by more than one of these persons, we include them in the power pool, particularly if they have been previously mentioned by at least one knowledgeable.

At this point we 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.

## CAUTIONS

The technique just described will provide the names of the power actors in the community. But, in and of itself, it will not tell us the interaction pattern (structure) which exists among the power actors. Also, the identification process will not provide information about the characteristics of the power actors. Both of these areas of information are important. In small communities, we can get information about the **power structure** by observing which of the persons named (1) "have coffee" together, (2) get together socially, (3) frequently stop in each other's places of business and/or (4) are related to each other. We can usually find out about organizational affiliation, church membership, age and occupation without direct questioning.

Once we have identified the power actors and their interaction structure and have their characteristics recorded, we still have the problem of deciding how the change agent relates to these key people for the purpose of initiating change. This is particularly true if we have not had any previous contact with the power actors.

Because power is a dynamic element, we should not conclude that one identification effort will serve for all time. The rate of change in the community, particularly population change, is one guide we can use to determine the need for repeating the procedure.

In sum, the change agent must combine his knowledge of who the power actors are, the generalizations regarding social power actors, and the principles of social action to increase his effectiveness as a change agent.

## Summary

The major purpose of this publication has been to outline a technique for identifying community power actors, that is, those individuals who play a major role in community decision-making. As a background for the technique and a source of information for strategy in social change, we have presented several generalizations regarding social power and power actors:

1. Social power exists and is exercised in every social system, including the community.
2. Power actors do relate themselves to each other and act in concert on many community issues, but
  - a. the form of the power structure may vary from community to community and within the community over time, and
  - b. power actors frequently specialize by issue area, so that only a few of the pool of power actors act on any specific issue.
3. The power actors with the most power have that power primarily because of their influence, not their positions of authority, with the possible exceptions of authority over credit, money, jobs or mass media. They have probably held authority positions in community organizations 5 to 15 years previously.
4. Power actors generally are past 50 years of age; have higher than average incomes; control credit, money or jobs; are better educated than other persons in their age group; have lived in the community for a long time; are self-employed, owner-operators or executives, and have access to needed resources.
5. Power actors prescribe routes to power in a community, such as being active in community affairs, succeeding in one's own business, checking out ideas with present power actors, joining the "right" groups and holding office in these groups.

6. Power actors value their position, are aware of their position and will work hard to keep it. They do this through supporting or opposing projects. The posture that power actors take often depends upon what the proposal involves, when they were informed about it, how they were informed and who informed them.

The steps presented in the reputational identification technique are:

1. Identify the relevant geographical area.
2. Select the issue areas in which power actors are to be identified.
3. Select an appropriate number of knowledgeable.
4. Develop the approach to use in contacting knowledgeable.
5. Develop appropriate questions for each issue area.
6. Write down your own perception of who the power actors are for each issue area.

7. Interview each knowledgeable.
8. Summarize the information obtained from knowledgeable.
9. Select two or three of the persons receiving the most "votes" and ask them the same questions asked knowledgeable.
10. Make final adjustments in the names to be included in the pool of power actors.
11. Repeat the entire process at intervals of 5 to 10 years.

We are finding out more and more about social power and power actors all the time. With new knowledge, many of the generalizations presented here may be amended or refined. Innovations may also be developed in the identification procedure which will dictate the need for modifying the procedure we have outlined.

The following selected bibliography is intended to direct the interested student to some of the basic research efforts which played a central role in the development of this publication.

## Selected Bibliography

Beal, George M. Social Action; Instigated Social Change in Large Social Systems. In Copp, James H. ed., *Our Changing Rural Society*. pp. 233-264. Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa. 1964.

*In this article, Beal summarizes most of the social power research done between 1950 and 1960. In addition, the importance of social power, as personified in power actors, is related to the over-all concept of social change.*

Bohlen, Joe M., Beal, George M., Klonglan, Gerald E., and Tait, John L. Community Power Structure and Civil Defense. *Sociological Studies in Civil Defense*. Iowa Agr. and Home Ec. Exp. Sta. Ames, Iowa. 1964.

*This study of Prairie City replicates and tests a series of hypotheses about social power in a rural community. It provides a succinct statement of the concept of social system and social power. The data are particularly relevant for rural communities.*

D'Antonio, William V., and Ehrlich, Howard J. *Power and Democracy in America*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 1961.

*This book includes several papers of general interest on the subject of social power. Some of the conceptual problems of researching social power are illuminated.*

Form, William H. and Miller, Delbert C. *Industry, Labor and Community*. Harper and Brothers, New York. 1960. *This is a book covering a broad range of material of use to*

*anyone engaged in initiating community change. Of particular relevance, however, are several chapters on social power. Subjects include national power structures, as well as community power structures. Research findings, hypotheses and methodologies are presented.*

Hunter, Floyd. *Community Power Structure*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N. C. 1953.

*Hunter's book is the departure point of most current social power research. The findings are of use in suggesting what to look for, rather than as generalizations. The focal point of the study was a large southern metropolitan area.*

Powers, Ronald C. *Social Power in a Rural Community*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Iowa State University Library, Ames, Iowa. 1963.

*This is one of the first studies to focus on a small rural community power structure. Its primary value is in the development of a related set of hypotheses which are of concern to the development of community action strategy.*

Presthus, Robert. *Men at the Top*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1964.

*The value of this book is found in its comparison of the research conceptions of social and political scientists relative to community power structures. Both approaches are operationalized, and the results of studies in two New York communities are reported.*

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