

The Power in Sustainability Studies

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ABSTRACT

Power is one of the important concepts in sociological research. However, how power affects sustainable development is under research. This paper firstly highlights the important status of power/ knowledge in power studies, and then discusses theories concerning power in an attempt to sort out frameworks to analyse power. Finally, existing research on power in sustainability studies are discussed. This paper will provide a powerful insight into the status and role of power in the sustainability studies, and promote the research progress on how to better understand sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Power is considered as an elusive (Bachrach & Baratz 1962), yet ubiquitous concept, which appears in every moment of our social life (Gaventa 2003). It used to be closely associated with negative connotations, given that power is always related to violence, force and manipulation (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). As defined by Dahl (1957), power occurs when “A exercises power over B when A makes B do something B otherwise would not do” (Silva & Backhouse 2003, p.298), which indicates the causal and coercive relations in power. However, the positive meaning of power has been increasingly acknowledged by scholars as their understanding of it has changed. Foucault proposed that “power is not a thing but a relation between things and people as they struggle to secure ‘truthfully’ embedded meanings” (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006, p.10). This contrasts with the conventional understanding that emphasizes power as a thing possessed by a privileged group rather than a social relation embedded in our daily life (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006; Gaventa 2003; Hall 2001). In Foucault’s view, power can also be positive rather than prohibitive, repressive and negative (Gaventa 2003), since it facilitates the formation of capability in social relations, where the social relations can both make things possible and impossible (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). For example, after the Wenchuan earthquake in China, 2008, people nationwide initiated a series of voluntary

campaigns to support the quake-affected victims. Various organizations donated money, goods and materials to the victims, and meanwhile thousands of volunteers from different regions came to the disaster site, devoting themselves to the disaster-relief works. The reconstruction work was continually supported by the whole society, which made a difference for the quake-affected victims and helped them to start a new life. This example shows that grassroots power contributes to the reconstruction of the homeland, and power can change people’s lives for the better.

Even if the connotations of power are contradicted, this can hardly deny that power permeates and influences daily life. As Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips (2006) indicated, “power is to organization as oxygen is to breathing.”(p.3). Society and other organizations are all constituted by social relations, where power is ultimately inscribed in them (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006; Hall 2001). Therefore, it is crucial to have a better understanding of power and its mechanism so as to deal with the emerging social phenomena and problems. This paper aims to adapt the theoretical framework that was originally developed in the fields of sociology and organization studies to explore the role of power in sustainability studies. In doing so, this paper firstly describes the shift of power focus from the body to the soul and the integration of the two, highlighting the important status of power/ knowledge in power studies. The paper then

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discusses the most frequently cited theories concerning power in an attempt to sort out the framework to analyse power and discuss the applications of these theories. Moreover, existing research on power in sustainability studies are discussed in order to gain an insight into the status and role of power in the sustainability studies. Finally, this paper explores regularly used methodologies in conducting power research.

THE SPLIT OF POWER BETWEEN BODY AND SOUL AND THEIR REUNION

Frederick Winslow Taylor is recognized as the father of modern management, who created responsible employees and utilitarian projects (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Guided by the meta-routine of efficiency improvement, Taylor redesigned work by detailing work procedures and executing a radical division of labour, where employees were able to create maximum value in a given period of time by repeating their specific tasks (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The condition of the employees in Taylor's time was the same as that shown in the movie of *Modern Time*, where employees were assumed to act as machines. The major contribution of Taylor's work is "the linking of efficiency to power through the medium of the human body" (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006, p.52), in which he split the human's body and mind as well as created a discipline that targeted the human body to shape people's behaviours, so as to achieve an efficient effect (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006).

On the other hand, Mary Parker Follett, who worked as a social worker, argued for the idea of efficiency and considered it an incomplete managerial principle, which, to a great extent, eroded civilization (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). She advocated for American democracy and believed that democratic power was supposed to derive from the grassroots level (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Her idea was that people from the community were capable of learning from differences by cooperating with each other and then creating legitimacy through coactive power (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). She advocated the style of "power with" rather than "power over" and stressed the importance of people's moral character and real personality (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). As time went by, the social issue of tired workers became increasingly obvious, and George Elton Mayo, a

psychologist, found out that the industrial turmoil after World War II was mainly aroused by workers' conscious dissatisfaction rather than their dissatisfaction with wage and working conditions as previous assumed (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The locus of power shifted from the body to the mental being, which was reckoned as a reflective and analytical entity other than an obedient one (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Consequently, managing subjectivity became the main responsibility of the modern company.

The most significant power theorist of the late 20th century, according to widespread recognition, was Foucault (Gaventa 2003), and his book of *Discipline and Punish* lays the foundation for his understanding of power, which results in an explicit research focus on power (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). In Foucault's view, power refers to social relations, which permeate all levels of social existence (Hall 2001) and shape people's capability and conduct (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Haugaard (1997) judged that the essence of *Discipline and Punish* is the explicit understanding that meanings play a crucial role in constructing social life as a complex web of unjust and petty power relations. Additionally, power is also viewed as being subject-less, meaning that it is not possessed by any specific people or institutions but rather is created by and operates through its subjects (Gaventa 2003). Three ways to represent the relations of power exist: first, the subject is created as a particular self with both body and soul with respect to others; second, the subject is constituted in association with social class; and third, the subject is knowledge itself and its relations with others (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Taking an example from the last subject, when an employee comes to a new company, they will be led and guided by a supervisor, whose experience and knowledge about the work procedure is much richer than the former's. At this time, there exists power between their relations. Moreover, the understanding of the split of body and soul is assumed to be unnecessary, since the body is constituted by the ways of acting, thinking and feeling, and soul is the object of reflection (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The embodied considers both body and soul, and justice can be executed by imposing disciplines on both the body and soul (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006).

More importantly, in Foucault's view, power is inseparable from knowledge (Gaventa 2003), and both power and knowledge are interwoven (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). As Foucault said, "there is no power relation without the creative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006, p.240). Besides, the knowledge people have of their world is embedded in power, and people are subject to a conscious understanding of how power has historically shaped their social life (Clegg & Bailey 2007). The object of knowledge is the consequence of power since it determines what kind of knowledge has been extracted, distributed and retained (Gaventa 2003), while power is the consequence of battle among actors for producing the truth (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Therefore, the fundamental form of knowledge/power comes into being (Gaventa 2003).

THE INFLUENTIAL POWER THEORIES

Two Faces of Power

The locus of power are different between sociologists and political scientists due to their different underlying assumptions and research methodologies, where sociologists consider power as centralized, while the political scientists see it as widely diffused (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). Political scientists criticize the elitist approach they see advocated by sociologists, according to three aspects, including seeing power as an integral structure, the structures being seen as stable and equating the reputed as the actual power (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). However, political scientists themselves have not noticed their own limits in analysing power (Bachrach & Baratz 1962), in which they only consider participation in decision-making as power, focusing on the actors making decisions and the responses to those decisions (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). The process of nondecision-making, which uncovers the mobilization of bias, is neglected and overlooked in their research framework (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). Mobilization of bias, referring to the dominant values, political myths, rituals and institutions, which privilege the interests of certain people or groups, influences people's conducts (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). For example, even a professor is dissatisfied with a long-standing policy in the university, and he is afraid of overtly going against the rules since he faces pressure from

the risk of being considered disloyal to the university or of being isolated from colleagues as the minority. That's a kind of nondecision-making power that creates certain barrier to overt public conflicts (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). Consequently, mobilization of bias is considered to be a research topic that concentrates on scrutinising the dominant values, rules and procedures exercising power, the dynamics of mobilization of bias in influencing people's behaviours as well as the differences compared to decision-making power.

Three Dimensions of Power and the Fourth Dimension

In Lukes's book *Power: A Radical View*, he concluded the characteristics of two proposed faces of power and further developed the third dimension of power, which offers three layers of power for people to consider, including the liberal first dimension, reformist second dimension and radical third dimension (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). His interpretations of power have been enormously influential, invoking the debates among conceptual theorists as well as resulting in empirical studies attempting to test the impacts of the third dimension of power in people's lives (Dowding 2006). The first dimension of power is based on the Dahl's opinions on power that "A makes B to do something they would not otherwise do" (Silva & Backhouse 2003, p.298), which is a kind of coercive and manipulated power. Such power is embedded in concrete decisions and observable behaviours (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006); therefore, it is also called decision-making power. The characteristics of the second dimension of power are latent rather than manifest as in the case of the first. It is embedded in the nondecision-making actions, and its power is exercised through pressure from individuals' interpretive understanding of the intentions lying behind people's actions (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Importantly, Lukes provides the third dimension of power, which is known as hegemonic power, where one's real interest is systematically distorted and concealed, being influenced by political preferences (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). People are unaware of their real interest because of "mystification, repression or the sheer unavailability of alternative ideological frames" (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006, p.213). His three dimensions of power have been applied in empirical studies. For example,

Farmaki et al. (2015) applied Lukes's power theory to analyse the political context of sustainable tourism in Cyprus, where political structure, socio-cultural environment and external forces were identified as the three mechanisms that shape sustainable tourism. Importantly, Farmaki et al. (2015) claim that the third dimension of power did shape the identity of people living in Cyprus. Even empirical studies prove the existence of the third dimension of power, but there are also some critics of Lukes's theory. For instance, Benton argued against Lukes's understanding of "control of consciousness" working against people's real interest, which, in Benton's opinion, means that people will not be emancipated. Some scholars argue that the dimensions of power remain essentially contested, and the disparate conceptions of power have not been synthesized as well (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006).

Circuits of Power

Clegg (1989) compared the interaction of power to an electric circuit board, including episodic, social, and systemic levels, which integrates different perspectives on power as well as their relationships (Silva & Backhouse 2003). The episodic circuit, exercising power irregularly as various agents, addresses daily feelings, communication, conflict and resistance, which are considered on the micro level of power where the outcomes of daily power can be both positive and negative. The episodic circuit can also be understood as Dahl's coercive power, where the important thing is to identify A and B in the situation and the standing conditions (Silva & Backhouse 2003). The social circuit, also known as dispositional power, is constituted of macro level rules of practice and socially constructed meanings that notify member relations and legitimate authority. It is acknowledged as a capacity (Silva & Backhouse 2003), regardless of whether it was used explicitly or not, causing something to happen. For example, the traffic officer is able to stop the traffic on a busy street, which is embedded in the social norms of the traffic regulations. When the policeman exercises this power, the dispositional power transforms into episodic power (Clegg 1989). The systemic circuit, also known as facilitative power, is constituted of macro level technology, environmental contingencies, job design and networks, which is positive and capable of achieving the collective goal (Silva & Backhouse 2003). For example, the power of a

manager in an organization is not only legitimized by the organizational rules or norms, but also facilitated by the techniques or technologies available to him/her, which ensure compliance (Silva & Backhouse 2003). The facilitative circuit empowers or disempowers, and thus punishes or rewards, agency in the episodic circuit; and the techniques of discipline are the areas of importance to be figured out (Silva & Backhouse 2003). All three independent circuits interact at "obligatory passage points", which are channels for empowerment or disempowerment (Clegg 1989). The circuit theory not only takes the actions of organizational agents into account, but also their intention, strategies and plots (Silva & Backhouse 2003). Empirical studies have been conducted to test the circuit theory's explanatory role in different disciplines. (Silva & Backhouse 2003) applied the circuit framework of power to analyse the information system, detailing the process of institutionalizing an information system. They claim that it is a profound tool for analysing a complex phenomenon, making sense of power and its relation to the institutionalization of an information system (Silva & Backhouse 2003). Clegg (2014) applied the social and systemic circuits to explain two major crises, including the collapse of the USSR and the global financial crisis and further explains the conditions of social and systemic integration relating to the crises.

THE CONCEPT POWER IN SUSTAINABILITY STUDIES

Recently, a "critical turn" has influenced social science studies, which challenges the established thinking (Bramwell & Lane 2014). For example, from a critical perspective, the contexts of sustainable tourism are not assumed to be "given" or "natural"; rather, they are seen to be socially constructed, where unequal power relationships exist and influence people's perceptions and behaviours (Bramwell & Lane 2014). Power relations, different world views and political insights have become the hot topics in sustainable tourism since it is fundamentally part of society and embedded within contemporary capitalism and social values (Bramwell & Lane 2014). Consequently, power has become an increasingly important perspective to gain insight into sustainable tourism. The multiple sources and consequences of inequality, the forces of domination, hegemony and alienation, the practices and particulars of lived experience, the values and

beliefs of the marginalised and unrecognised, and the potential for emancipation have become crucial concerns in sustainable tourism studies, because the sustainable tourism studies reveals ethical and normative thinking about how we wish the world to be (Bramwell & Lane 2014). However, all of the concerns above are under represented (Bramwell & Lane 2014). As a result, it is of importance to “build alternative ways of knowing and thinking, and to assist in transformations that could improve lives and promote social justice“ (Bramwell & Lane 2014, p.3). The studies of power associated with the environment and sustainability have been heatedly discussed (Bryant 1998; Okolie 2003).

Even the concept of “sustainable development” has been advocated by political leaders to take the diverse environmental problem into account. The “business-as-usual” approach has been adopted by political and business leaders to avoid tough options (Bryant 1998). Therefore, the political and economic basis of contemporary environmental problems deserves further reflection (Bryant 1998). The conflicts and unequal power/knowledge relations have been identified in the area of sustainable studies in different regional levels, including the north-south level, national-local level and local integrative level. To be more detailed, political and economic elites have regularly sought to justify specific, usually highly unequal, patterns of human use of the environment in terms of “the greater social good” (Bryant 1998). For example, the “scientific forestry” management system from Germany was introduced into colonial Asia in the late nineteenth century. The main purpose of scientific forestry was the promotion of long-term commercial timber production; however, the “competitor species” were eliminated or restricted to the favoured tree species, which resulted in a worse situation in the ecological environment of Asian areas (Bryant 1998). So-called advanced management knowledge privileged the economic interest of certain groups by sacrificing the environment that local people rely on. Another example is Okolie (2003) studies examining the role of knowledge in sustainable development in Africa through analysing the food policy. He criticized that higher education in Africa had played a central role in advocating and universalizing Eurocentric knowledge and ways of knowing in Africa while marginalizing or delegitimizing the traditional production knowledge (Okolie 2003).

On the national-local level, Robbins (2000) expands the understanding of colonial

inventions to the differences between state and local knowledge in sustainable development. He conducted a case study of forestry at Kumbhalgarh, discovering that the state plays a role in reproducing fractured knowledge and institutionalizing knowledge rather than generating sustainable knowledge (Robbins 2000). In the context of forestry in India, knowledge was generated through contestation from the local level rather than according to the pattern of top-down knowledge transfer (Robbins 2000). Furthermore, instead of a macro analysis of how power influences sustainable development, local integrative level studies have also been conducted for the reason that local populations are unable to fully understand and participate in the development process (Wearing, Wearing & McDonald 2010). By taking the case study of the Kokoda Track and Papua New Guinea and based on Foucault’s interpretation of power, the mechanism, including dominance, negotiation, rationalities and resistance, was identified to reveal how power was exercised through the interactions between local villagers and tour operators (Wearing, Wearing & McDonald 2010). As a result, different levels of power relations have been discussed in sustainable studies, and the perspectives of hegemonic power, causal power and resistance have been empirically tested. However, how the different kinds of power interacted with each other and their relations have not gained sufficient attention. In particular, the technologies and techniques available to facilitate the idea of sustainable development have been neglected in this area.

METHODOLOGIES RELATED TO POWER STUDIES

There exist two general approaches to conducting research on power: one is critical and the other is discursive (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Critical analysis refers to the use of interpretative methods to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption of management practices and employment of various forms of theoretical critique to highlight the shortcomings of the previous mainstream approaches (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). However, little note has been taken of this by either academics or practitioners in the critical research. This is due, first of all, to the fact that the underlying conflicts of the previous assumption are discussed in a convoluted way, which fails to connect and integrate with the mainstream studies. Second, it is not easy for managers to understand and sort out the recommendations

made by critical research and exercise the new ideas in their practices, since this research only focuses on improving value judgements rather than practices in the workplace. Third, without a cohesive body of academic research, theoretical framework, or clear guidance for political engagement, these studies prevent both academics and practitioners from devoting themselves to the critical analysis (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). However, the critical perspective is worth exploring since it challenges the previous identity- and developed country-dominated body of knowledge, which makes the nature of such knowledge more profound (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006).

Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips (2006) offered two theories as foundations on which to analyse power in their book on critical analysis. Queer theory is the first foundation on which to analyse power (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006), which focuses attention on the essential categories of identity, especially regarding gender and sexuality (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). These boundaries, which historically and culturally shape social life, should be examined critically (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Applying queer theory to management studies, Parker (2002) challenges the idea of considering management as a category of work as well as a practice, both of which are traditional definitions of management; however, in his opinion, both notions are problematic (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The other foundation of critical theory is postcolonial theory, which challenges the certainties, orthodoxies and knowledge of the West (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips (2006) pointed out that it is necessary to understand how historical elements shape the process of globalization and the relationship between the global and the local in non-western countries. Conducting research in this area is worthwhile because it has not yet received the attention it deserves (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006).

With regard to discursive analysis, there exists a linguistic turn in philosophy, which sheds light on language, texts and then discourses in social research (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The methods of ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, hermeneutics and semiotics, and critical discourse analysis have been frequently employed as interpretive methods in social science (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Discourse analysis is particularly acknowledged as an appropriate method to

study power, which concentrates on framing the dynamics of power underlying the social construction (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Discourse used to be a linguistic concept, referring to “passages of connected writing or speech” and is redefined by Foucault as “a system of representation” (Hall 2001, p.72), which focuses on the rules and practices generating meaningful accounts in different periods of time (Hall 2001). Discourse concerns the production of knowledge, entailing specific meaning that shapes and influences people’s conduct (Hall 2001). In Foucault’s view, power/knowledge is represented in a form of discourse, which thereby builds up the social system (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The focus of discourse analysis is not on what the truth is. Instead, it concerns what is thought to be true (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). The nature of truth, the pattern of power as well as the complex social structures are all deciphered by discourse analysis (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Fairclough extended Foucault’s idea of discourse analysis into a more applicable method by proposing a framework to combine the interest of textual production and social structures via discourse (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Three categories are identified in discourse analysis, including subject, concept and object. Subjects are those who generate text and engage in modelling concepts, objects and subject positions, and concepts are “all of the constructions that arise out of structured sets of texts” (p.305), which make sense of social relations and physical objects and thereby constitute objects (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). This framework offers a way for researchers to analyse relationships among knowledge, social relations and social identities (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Discourse analysis is frequently used to understand power through the analysis of texts, speeches and records. For example, Topal (2009) conducted a case study of a public hearing held by the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board in Canada and found that the Board enacted institutional power on other parties depending on the power of expertise by analysing the hearing records.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on power and how its connotations and understandings have changed over time. Other than being seen as the symbol of violence and manipulations, it is considered to be the social relations permeating all social

life. The focus of power in organizational studies shifted from a split between the body and mind to a reunion of both foundations. In Foucault's view, power and knowledge are interwoven and are exercised in our daily lives all the time. Different dimensions of power have been discussed by different scholars. (Bachrach & Baratz 1962) claim that the two faces of power consist of decision-making and non-decision making, and they argue that the mobilization of bias deserves further exploration in the area of power studies. Lukes (1974) further developed these two dimensions and proposed the third dimension of power as hegemonic power, where one's real interest is concealed and the political preference dominates and influences people's minds. Clegg (1989) further synthesized the different perspectives of power and proposed the electronic circuit as a metaphor for the interactions of power, extending attention to the intentions and strategies of power as well. All of the frameworks of power are valuable, making the elusive concept of power easier to analyse and understand.

In terms of sustainability studies, there is also a critical turn towards reflecting on the assumptions that we have hitherto taken for granted. The context of sustainable studies has been considered to be socially constructed other than given and natural. Therefore, power plays a vital role in sustainability studies, and attending to the field's underlying power relations is a valuable way for scholars to gain insight into contemporary environmental problems. Colonial interventions have been heatedly discussed since the hegemonic power that the privileged group exercises violates the interest of people in less developed areas. The problem of unequal power relations has been laid out, which requires us to reflect on the compatibility of the knowledge advocated and the local situation when making decisions on sustainable development. Contestations from the local level have been considered to be the most valuable source of knowledge for future sustainable tourism. Meanwhile, different mechanisms of how power is exercised provide implications for both academics and practitioners in promoting the concept of sustainable development. However, although the perspectives of hegemonic power, causal power and resistance have been empirically tested, the question of how different kinds of power interact with each other and their relations has not received sufficient attention. In particular, the technologies and techniques

available to facilitate the idea of sustainable development have been neglected in this area, and these deserve further exploration.

Two methods commonly used in power research are critical analysis and discourse analysis, where the former challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions in previous mainstream studies, which makes the body of knowledge more profound and sound, while the latter considers knowledge, social relations and social identities to be constituted by discourses, where the underlying and meaningful rules and practices become the focus of research.

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