



RESEARCH PAPER**Influence of Reification of Power on Social Change: An Analysis of Elias and Bourdieu****Dr. Mir Sadaat Baloch**

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ABSTRACT

Debates of power, a shared limitation appears in discussing the concept as it takes on a life of its own. It adopts objectivity – this limitation has to do with the reification of power as a thing that exists in society. This reification of power can influence any social change and we must understand how to overcome this limitation. The paper explores the concept of power that how it has changed over the years. Presenting the different views to power. It discusses the influence of power on the process of decision making. The paper further discusses how a society transforms by the structure of social relationships by presenting Elias and Bourdieu work about reification. This article concludes that for any social change we need to transcend reification of power and the role of people is fundamental.

KEYWORDS Decision Making, Figuration, Habitus, Power Relations, Social Change, Conflict

Introduction

Investigation of power relations, which can be a central issue in many social processes, is limited (Elliott & Kenis, 2007). This demands a closer look at the concept of power.

Power is neither defined as the power of one actor over another actor (power as an act of subordination) nor as the power to do certain things (power as a capacity to act). Power is defined as a crisscrossing field of power strategies that forms and regulates the relational identities of social actors, their range of appropriate actions. By virtue of its productive role in shaping meanings and identities, power is intrinsically linked to knowledge and the local forms of power-knowledge are embedded in institutions' technologies (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009).

These preceding lines imply how the concept of power has changed over the years. It is no longer considered just a required act. Power is now reflected as something which is continuously active to regulate and shape actions to the best interests of the social actors. It is no longer exercised only through compulsion but through knowledge, laws, institutions and technologies. This elusive nature of power makes its exploration challenging. Discussing the discourse of power can be subtle and overlapping. While doing that a writer may transit between discourses involuntarily.

Wittgenstein explains power as a 'family resemblance' concept. This entails that when we use the concept in different contexts its meaning changes sufficiently so that there is no single definition of power which covers all usage (Haugaard, 2002).

In general, power is implied as a structural conception of the political and social organization that is dispositional (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). It can be regarded as the capability to realise certain ends in society through management (Raven, 2008). Over the years it has evolved, whereas Dahl (1957), Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Lukes (1974) mainly represent the functionalist view of power.

That view considers it as the capacity to get the work done against the opposition or will of people (Hardy, 1994), or make them do something they would not have done otherwise (Dahl, 1957). Research scholars have questioned this simple definition of power over the years, which resulted in a variety of different conceptualisations (Haugaard, 2002). In each subject area, this conception has been viewed differently; mostly the concentration of the debate was from the functionalist perspective (Hardy, 1994).

The functionalist view generally investigates the concept from the realm of politics and considers it a functional thing, whereas, the structural view of power considers it as a product of structure and an agency emerging from social interactions. The emphasis is more on power relations emerging from the structure of the society or an organisation, rather than from its functionality.

The Radical View of Power

Lukes (1974), while critically examining Dahl (1957) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962), asserts that too much attention is paid to the obvious conflicts, behaviours and actors while ignoring the concealed power apparatus that helps in keeping issues out of debate. Arts and Tatenhove (2004) suggest that this sort of power operates through agency and structures that favour certain interests over others while the subjects are mostly unaware of it. The focus is on the behaviour of two actors, A and B, when an obvious conflict arises.

Lukes (2005) claims the weak point about this notion of power is that it fails to identify the means of shaping, determining and influencing the wants of B. He argues that through the manipulation of perception, A can make B believe that B's subjective interests are closer to A's interests than B's objective interests. This might result in no conflict, or there may be only a latent conflict.

He proposed that the radical face of power could be used for overcoming that underlying conflict through action and inaction. The radical view of power indicates that controlling the thoughts and interests of people can also help in attaining power. Power, in this sense, is manifested in the instruments, techniques and procedures to control the thoughts and interests of the people (Clegg, 1989).

Lukes (2005) further claims that this face of power is crafty and tends to influence the desires of people without their being conscious of its consequences. When the ruling class controls the people, they do not do so at their desire, but it is embedded in the structure of the society. However, this fails to explain how agency and structure are created in such situations. Giddens (1984) critiques this radical view of power and claims that it is hard to dominate the public for a long time. Ultimately, the public will realise it and will react, as they are capable and well-informed and such situations will lead to conflicts that will result in power relations.

The Functionalist View of Power

Pluralist theorists argue that conflict is a prerequisite for the exercise of power, so they co-relate it with power relations (Hardy, 1994). They suggest that power relations

could only be witnessed when there is a clear conflict and to resolve that, a party has to dominate and take charge.

When there is a clear conflict between two parties, each party will try to be dominant to achieve their goals and the powerful between them will achieve their goals (Lukes, 2005). These theorists argue that there is only one condition for the exercise of power and that is conflict. However, the group showing resistance also has power, but its power is weak as compared to the group that achieves its goals. Power is not shared by the selected few, but a few groups have more power as compared to others (Clegg, 1989).

This conceptualisation of power fails to resolve some of the major problems associated with the analysis of power. It does indicate that in society different groups hold power but fails to mention whether or not they have any presence in the process of decision-making (Clegg, 1989). It realises that all the groups have political resources available to them (Dahl, 1957), whereas it is difficult for a variety of interest groups to get any chance to reach the parliament.

People exercise their power through voting and elected leaders take decisions on their behalf (Dahl, 1957), but there is a good number that does not vote. In the United Kingdom the majority of the people vote in the general elections, i.e., 65 per cent (UK Political, 2012), but in Pakistan a majority of the people do not vote, i.e., 56 per cent (EBSCOhost, 2012). In a system, which may have a pluralist setup a fair proportion of people can still be left unrepresented, and they might show resistance to a decision.

The functionalist view explores the concept of power from the realm of politics. Chief critique of this view is that power can only be acknowledged in obvious conflicts while ignoring the hidden power apparatus. Over the years the view took a radical turn and tried to identify means of shaping, determining and influencing the wants of people. This radical view of power does indicate that different groups hold power in society but fails to state whether they have any role in the process of decision-making. These shortcomings lead to another dimension for the analysis of power: the structural view of power.

The Strategic Perspective on Power

The strategic perspective on power asserts that to achieve goals, one must influence the environment through distributive and collective means (Kapilashrami, 2010). When power is exercised over individuals, it is distributive and when people collaborate to augment their collective power over a third party, it is by collective means (Kapilashrami, 2010).

Foucault's (1980) concept of 'disciplinary power' may form a improved understanding of the process of normalisation. The classic concept of power holds that it can repress, direct, or even coerce people subjected to it, where disciplinary power creates the prejudice essential to perform it (Kapilashrami, 2010). The disciplinary model is the modern configuration of power, where technological power and political rationalities are devised in such a fashion that it makes the necessary action desirable (Kapilashrami, 2010). In order to create discipline within an organisation, it is fundamental to create normalisation with the help of defined roles and responsibility. Roles and responsibilities can be defined through effective planning and decision-making.

Rationale behind Decision-making

The issue of legitimate and illegitimate power comes into play during the process of decision-making when parties are trying to exercise power to achieve their goals and

objectives (Pfeffer, 1981). The party that has the legal sanction to use power has authority, and it is considered normal and inevitable for it to practise it. Authority has been taken as apolitical, for granted, and assumed to be functional (Hardy, 1994). Any action taken under it will always be considered impartial and rational. Authority and illegitimacy of power will enable a group to take most of the decisions in a community and that elite will rule the community through legal power (Clegg, 1989). This elitist model suggests that some rules and procedures have to be followed before any decision is taken (Hindess, 1996).

There is a hierarchy in the exercise of power and the authority holders will consistently make the best decisions in the interests of people (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). This interpretation on the part of rulers does not represent the ground realities of society, rather it represents the interest of the state (Scott, 1999). The ruling elite model suggests that there is an oligarchy of selected figures that take the decisions for communities and society (Hindess, 1996). Scholars challenge the model as it ignores the aspects of resistance during a decision-making process.

Elias view on structural power

The structural view of power argues that it is created through agency and structure. Agency or structure is constructed during power strategies that are operational at the level of discourse (Foucault, 2002). Here, discourse does not mean a set of written or spoken statements; it is a quasi-transcendental notion that focuses on the 'rules of formation' that create expressions within a particular setting (Torfing, 2009). The rules do not exist independently but rather they are embedded in the sediment forms of discourses, which they are regulating (Torfing, 2009).

In all discussions of power, a common limitation emerges in exploring the concept as it takes on a life of its own. It assumes objectivity – this limitation has to do with the reification of power as a thing that exists in society. It is an example of the beguiling tendencies of our disciplinary discourses to 'form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1980).

In societies like Pakistan, the role of people becomes more vital as 'more and more people are more dependent on more other, more time'. (Mowles, 2015). This interdependency of people was one of the central themes of Elias' work. Like other sociologists, Elias also had a concern about the order of social life, but he did not see the social order as a challenge, but rather 'the apparent independence of the social order from intentional human action' (Van Krieken, 2001).

He was concerned about the seeming absence of relationship between human intentions and the social order (Van Krieken, 2001). The society is envisaged as a web of structured relations created by the association of human agents to pursue their interests and goals that would result in social institutions or concepts (Van Krieken, 2001). In Elias' opinion, an individual in the society is associated with other individuals by political, economic and social relations, irrespective of the position they hold in the society (Van Krieken, 1998). The emphasis here is on people and relationships, not the position of power held. He implies that a society transforms by the structure of social relationships or changes in its conditions. However, these changes are not related to the actions and decisions of certain supposedly powerful groups or individuals (Elias, 1978a).

Elias suggests that the agency of the individual towards society depends on the position he or she holds in it, and the decision taken will not only affect him or her but others related to him or her (Ritzer & Smart, 2001). The action of an individual also has consequences on others; hence there is an interdependency surfacing through his or her

action. Once a decision is made, the action 'becomes interwoven with those of others: it unleashes a further chain of actions', and the effects depend on the human network and the distribution of power (Van Krieken, 2001).

Elias challenges the idea of people being independent and operating under a social system or structure. The intention, action and interaction of humans are interdependent on a web of intention, action and interaction with other people (Mowles, 2015). The outcome of their actions cannot be predicted without knowing about their *figuration* and *habitus*. He claims them as being interdependent and comprising what he called *figuration* and characterised by historical and social forms of personality or *habitus* (Van Krieken, 2001). The concept of *figuration* was introduced by Elias to put the issue of human interdependencies in the centre of sociological theory in the hope of eliminating the use of words 'individual' and 'society' while discussing issues related to social structure and social transformation (Van Krieken, 2001). He favoured the idea that people should be treated as plural, as part of groups and networks, and that their unique identity and individuality only existed through and within those networks or *figurations*. Individuality can only be experienced through interaction within a web of social relationship. Elias critiques the 'closed personality' image of humans and argues that this concept of *homo clauses* should be reviewed vis-à-vis freedom, autonomy, and independent agency (Van Krieken, 2001).

In his view, societies are formed through the interaction of the structures and processes with 'the *figuration* formed by the actions of interdependent people' (Elias, 1978b:103). The usage of concepts such as 'society' or 'social system' makes it easier to deny the human agency and individuality, but the usage of *figuration* can help understand the ideas better (Van Krieken, 1998). The development of personality make-up or shared social *habitus* that establishes the standard basis of individual behaviour is determined by the dynamics of *figurations* (Van Krieken, 2001).

The interdependency of individuals is not created by the positions they hold in the network but results from the relationship they have within the network of people. There is a constant fluctuation in these relationships, which Elias attributes as:

Paradoxically, we are both formed by and from interdependencies with others, he argues, because we are social through and through. Our need for love, respect, recognition, care, money, a career means that we are dependent on others, as, paradoxically they are dependent on us. Together we are bound by relations of power: As long as I need something from someone else, more than they need it from me, or they are in a position to direct me, power is temporarily tilted in their favour. (Mowles, 2015)

Elias asserts that the focus of social examination should be on the relationship between goal-directed, intentional anthropological actions and the unconscious and unintentional course of intertwining actions and their consequences (Elias & Scotson, 1994). The expression 'interweaving activities' suggests that the actions are interdependent and continual in nature; hence, considering any action independently in a cross-section may not be practical.

In the view of Elias, the fundamental aspect of these relations is 'the relational character of power' (Elias, 1978b). He argues that reification of power and power are unlike from control and liberty. He further arrests that it is important to be vary about association formed by power, and must debate outside the continuum of 'freedom' and 'determinism' and emphasis more on power relations. There is a ratio of power, and it has a mutual uniqueness; in the network of power relations the less powerful groups also exercise a 'boomerang effect' back on those with greater power-chances (Van Krieken, 2001). This

means that the rule or authority exists in relation to a person or a group and the power of that person or group must be considered in social analysis.

Elias discusses two critical topics in his research, the fundamentality of history in societal examination. Furthermore, that alteration in societal lifecycle is usual and should be preserved as such. Instead of looking at changes in a partial way, alteration should be preserved as something that takes place over a period in a procedural way. If we need to understand the *sociogenesis* of any sociological problem in Pakistan, then it should be considered as the outcome of a long process of fluctuation in relations. 'The increasing competition between both individuals and groups in highly differentiated societies causes constant fluctuations in relations, including changing power chances, which are reflected in the production of knowledge' (Mowles, 2015).

We should try to recognise the 'processual' nature of concepts such as bureaucracy or rationality and may work towards bureaucratisation and rationalisation (Van Krieken, 2001). We have to recognise the plurality of processes; groups and individuals interlock with one another lacking a contributory domination allocated to them. This implies that political, psychological, economic, and geographical, processes are tangled social change not any domination (Van Krieken, 2001). Further insight into the idea of a process can be gained through the work of Bourdieu.

The Idea of Social by Bourdieu

While examining the reproduction of structured inequalities, Bourdieu disposes of the idea of static structure and proposes ongoing processes (structuring) through which social relationships are formed and transformed (Beilharz, 1992). His idea of processes resonates with Elias' when he discusses social relations. He identifies the relationship between the individual and society but refrains from using the individual as a unit of analysis (Best, 2002).

Bourdieu considers the individual as the indication to empirical study and studies their behaviour as agents of social process (Beilharz, 1992). He claims that our responses are structured by the socio-cultural environment, what he has called their *habitus*, so individuals act or react according to their *habitus* (Beilharz, 1992). The structures are explored by individual consciousness with an understanding that the person (agent) is a 'producer and reproducer of objective meaning', and their actions and works are the product of a *modus operandi* beyond their creation (Beilharz, 1992).

What Elias termed as relations are called structures by Bourdieu, because their creation is beyond the control of an individual and depends on the agency of an individual. The individual in Elias' case is dependent on relations, whereas for Bourdieu the individual is dependent on *modus operandi* (a cultural aspect of social structure). In both cases, the individual is not considered independent and is influenced by the context. Bourdieu identifies a relation between social structure, culture and action while analysing power. For Bourdieu, the heart of all social life is power; hence he never treated it as a separate domain of study (Swartz, 2012).

Both individual behaviour and action take place in structured arenas of conflict termed as *fields* by Bourdieu, linking the action of *habitus* to the stratifying structure of power in modern society (Swartz, 2012). His vision of modern life is an arrangement of various material and cultural resources dispensed through moderately independent but structurally homologous *fields* of circulation, consumption, and production (Swartz, 2012). The association between a cultural practice and social structure is facilitated through *fields*. The focus of his work therefore is how relatively autonomous *fields* of conflict interlock

individuals and groups in the struggle over valued resources, thus unwittingly reproducing the social stratification order (Swartz, 2012).

Elias rejects the idea of people's unintentional actions and claims they are not independent, whereas Bourdieu also does not support the idea of independent human beings but he supports the idea of unintentional actions. He claims the context (*fields*) in which individuals are somehow independent and they control their actions; hence the result of these actions is unintentional (Swartz, 2012).

Elias suggests that we need to transcend reification of power. He argues that to do so, we need to think in terms of relations rather than isolation. The role of people is fundamental to social change, and we need to understand it. Without people, it is hard to bring about or analyse a change. The changes that may occur within a society are a result of relationships among people. A decision taken or action planned is a consequence of relationships among people. He puts people at the centre of any social change. Hence, change cannot be forced from an external source; it has to come from within the people.

In order to drive any change in a better way, we should look into its processual character rather than discrete events. 'To privilege a process is to notice and describe relationships and functions as they evolve over time' (Mowles, 2015). Planning or implementation of change at a cross-section can improve the process. This means social change should be taken as a whole process, where one event may lead to the next event through relationships between the events and people in time and space. As indicated by Bourdieu, these processes are shaped by individual behaviours. *Fields* that link the actions of *habitus* to the society shape these behaviours.

Conclusion

This dependence of people was one of the central themes of Elias' work. He emphasised the role of the people and relationships, not the position of power they hold. He implied that a society transforms by the structure of social relationships or changes in its conditions. He believed that people should be treated as plural, as part of groups or networks, with their unique identity and individuality only existing through and within those networks or *figurations*. So, the interdependency of individuals is not created because of the position they hold in the network, but it results from the relationship they hold in the network of people. Elias asserts that the focus of sociological analysis should be on the relationship between human activities and their consequences.

Elias suggests that we need to transcend reification of power. He indicates that to do so, we need to think in terms of relations rather than isolation. The role of people is fundamental to social change, and we need to understand it. Without them, it is hard to bring about or analyse a change. The changes that may occur within a society are a result of relationships among people. A decision taken or action planned is a consequence of relationships among people. Change cannot be forced from an external source; it has to come from the people.

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