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ABSTRACT

Machell's Theory of Power was developed to provide students in organizational theory two formulas of relationships to apply to organizational situations and organizational power. Formula 1 indicates that the level of power of person A is determined by the level of dependency that person B has on person A; and that person A's power can be substantiated or changed by the use of Formula 2. In Formula 2, person A uses a stressor stimulus to illicit fear in person B, which fosters a realization of the fullness of person B's dependency on person A, therefore solidifying or increasing person A's power. The overuse of Formula 2 by person A may motivate person B to lessen his/her dependency on person A. When this occurs, person A may lose power over person B. These formulas can also be used in counseling situations, by either the counselor or the client. Since the level of dependency of one person on another helps to determine power, it is important to explore the issue of dependency in the counseling relationship. The use of this power formula in counseling situations partially redefines the notions of transference and countertransference. Counselors need to be aware of power structures in counseling situations. (NB)

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Power and the Counseling Relationship

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Abstract Statement:

This article discusses the relationship of power to the concept of dependency and explains how the dependency issues in counseling make a discussion of power necessary.

As a University professor, I am in a unique position since I teach courses in counseling as well as courses in organizational theory. In my course in organizational theory, I created a teaching device which I egocentrically named "Machell's Theory of Power." This "theory" is used to create student discussion and thought by giving the students' formulas of relationships to apply to organizational situations, hopefully to gain insights concerning organizational power. "Machell's Theory of Power" is presented in this manner:

Formula 1 \uparrow Power = \uparrow Dependency

Formula 2 \uparrow Stressors = \uparrow Fear = \uparrow Dependency = \uparrow Power

These formulas indicate that (1) the level of power of person A is determined by the level of dependency that person B has on person A (Formula 1), and (2) person A's power can be substantiated, or changed by the use of Formula 2, whereby person A will utilize a stressor stimulus to illicit fear in person B, which will foster a realization of the fullness of person B's dependency on person A, therefore solidifying or increasing person A's power. An example might be an employer who states to an employee "If this assignment is not completed by 5:00 p.m. this afternoon, then you can look for another job!" This message obviously is a common stressor stimulus which may create a fear in the employee, increasing his/her awareness of his/her dependency on the job and the employer for their

livelihood. Compliance to the communication would substantiate the employer's power. Power can be defined as "the ability to elicit compliance." The level of power of an employer with an independently wealthy employee may not be as great since the employee's dependence on the employer would be less and would make the stressor stimulus less impactful and would elicit less fear. We must recognize that employees may also be very adept at using "Machelli's Theory of Power" and may gain power over the employer effectively. For example, an employee with an important and rare expertise may make a statement such as "without a pay increase, I cannot continue to work here," and as a result this stressor would conjure fear, a realization of dependency, and with the employer's compliance substantiate the employee's power.

The overuse of this formula by person A may create in person B a desire to lessen their own level of dependence on person A because the continual compliance may be perceived as undesirable. Once person B has succeeded in lessening his/her dependency, then person A's power is lessened, and person A's use of the formula may no longer be impactful on person B.

This formula can be applied to any human relationship where one person desires compliance of another to their wishes. The counseling relationship may be an example of one such situation. The counselor may utilize

"Machell's Theory of Power" as well as the client. When is the application of this formula appropriate in the counseling relationship and when inappropriate?

Since the level of dependency of one person on another will help to determine power, it is important to explore the issue of dependency in the counseling relationship. The counselor may depend on the client for financial support, feelings of being needed, feelings of belongingness, fantasy material, etc. A client for example may utilize this power formula by sending a "stressor stimulus" such as, "I told you I didn't want to discuss my husband! I will need to find another counselor if you mention this again!" This stressor may elicit a fear in the counselor that his/her needs will not be met and the dependency being experienced, the client's power is substantiated.

The client may depend on the counselor for emotional support, feelings of belongingness, to satisfy legal court orders, etc. The counselor obviously with client dependency, can likewise exercise power.

It may become apparent to the reader that the application of this power formula by either counselor or client is partially redefining the notion of transference and countertransference. Transference, "in psychoanalytic therapy, is the phenomenon of the projection of feelings, thoughts, and wishes onto the analyst, who has come to represent an object from the patient's past. . . ." "As

the most important relationship of the child is that with his parents, the relationship between patient and analyst established in the transference becomes analogous to, or, at times, even similar to the patient's relationship with his parents in childhood" (Campbell, 1981). The notion of dependency is evident in this discussion of transference as in a discussion of power.

The counselor may positively use this power "formula" to manipulate client behavior toward positive change, but also use can take on a negative form when use of this formula supersedes the treatment concerns or interferes with the sensitive perception of treatment needs. An example of the negative use of this concept may be if a counselor is having his/her feelings of worthiness satisfied by a particular client, the counselor may use "stressors" to dissuade a client from legitimately and appropriately discontinuing treatment. "You are not ready to stop seeing me!" may serve as that "stressor", which might elicit fear in the client which might remind the client of his/her dependency on the counselor's good feelings. A more subtle example would involve feelings of intimidation by the counselor. Intimidation can be explained in terms of this formula concept by stating that intimidation is a feeling of discomfort created by feelings of inadequacy or powerlessness in relationship to another who is perceived as having power. The "power" differs

tremendously in its nature and characteristics but may be a quality which is perceived as being that which makes another greater in the mind of the person: greater education, more wealth, physical attractiveness, etc. are examples. Just as in my power concept the level of power is determined by the level of dependency, the level of intimidation is determined by the counselor's awe which is created by a perception that that quality is more important than similar qualities in self. Intimidation is created because those qualities in the counselor that he/she depends on to feel powerful are perceived as not being depended on by the client, because the client has something "better." This belief creates threat in the counselor and may interfere with the counseling relationship until this belief/feelings can be altered back: until the counselor can again feel "powerful."

My satisfaction in being a counselor is based at least partially on feelings of being depended on or needed and I can state that my satisfaction is based on the power I perceive which is created by client dependence. I want to recognize this need satisfaction in myself and use "Machell's Theory of Power" to elicit positive change in my clients without allowing my need gratification to interfere with the counseling process.

References

Campbell, R. J. (1981). Psychiatric Dictionary 5th Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.