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### Abstract

A person's identity puts them in different social categories, positions, and statuses. An individual's social position has corresponding power or powerlessness, which influences their interaction with others in the community. The individual identities, social positions, and authority of social workers place them in a higher level of power in relation to the people they serve. This imbalance of power between social workers and clients affects the helping process. This article discusses how personal identity and power influence social work practice in the Indian context. Social structures like caste-based discrimination and patriarchal norms contribute to inequitable social positioning in the country. Following a critical social work approach, the paper presents the different dimensions of power in the social work relationship and proposes means for sharing power with the clients.

*Keywords:* power, critical social work, identity, self-reflection, India

Social workers work with individuals, groups, and communities by establishing relationships with them. Relationships can be therapeutic, empowering, and supportive when social workers use them to help clients. Such therapeutic relationships are most effective when the social worker and clients have mutual respect and clear understanding. However, an undisputable power dynamic exists in the client–social worker relationship. The power of the social worker emanates from the positional authority, the individual identity, and the social location of the worker. In the Indian context, the power associated with identity is unevenly distributed to extreme levels through social structures like patriarchy and the caste system. The power dynamics affect the relationship between the social worker and the people they work with. Critical reflection on these power dynamics would help social workers develop more effective and empathetic relationships with their clients.

### **Understanding Identity and Power**

All of us carry certain identities in our lives. We name our identities while describing ourselves. For example, one person may say she is a woman, mother, teacher, or student, and sometimes we may use multiple identities like family name or profession (Al-Krenawi et al., 2016). Labeling someone's identity subtly or explicitly puts the individual into social categories. Furthermore, these social categorizations—based on existing social structures and hierarchy—also identify a person's position in society. Yan (2016) comments that these “social categories that we use to classify people are products of the social construction process through which people are included or excluded from a certain categorical collective” (p.115).

Identity not only bears power but is used as a focal point for the expression of power as well. There is a tendency for people to ascribe themselves to dominant identities in any given society. Dominelli (2002) opines that dominant groups deploy a process of othering anyone deemed to be different and label others as inferior and legitimate the exercise of power over them. People highlight the identities that give them higher esteem based on the social positioning of that identity; this occurs because identities are constructed and maintained for the interest of the dominant groups (Smith, 2008). For example, in India, it is common for people from an upper caste to add their caste to their official names and on social media. In contrast, people from lower castes attempt to avoid anything that would reveal their inferior caste identity. Such practice results from perceived notions about the superior and inferior positions of the castes in society that have been constructed over centuries and reconfirmed in everyday life.

Smith (2008) defines power as "the capacity, held individually or collectively, to influence either groups or individuals (including oneself) in a given social context" (p. 23). We come across different situations of power in our everyday interactions with people and institutions. Power is demonstrated in various forms, and we consciously or unconsciously understand its existence and behave to one's perceived power or powerlessness about the other person. Some general examples of these power dynamics include how a parent controls their child given their parental power. A student is conscious of the power their teachers hold at school, even though such power differentials are determined by the school's rules and the community's culture. Workers behave according to the power they attribute to their employer or supervisor in their workplace. A person from the lower caste in India is aware of their subservient powerlessness while interacting with a person from the upper caste. The positionality of the individuals and the perception of the power of one person over the other influence

relationships. Caste is a significant social identity in India, where people in the upper caste holds higher social position than those in the lower caste. The caste system in the Hindu religion categorizes people into four castes and numerous sub-castes among them. An individual's caste is determined by the caste they are born into, and it is not easy to move up to a higher caste (Ranganathan, 2022). Caste decided the occupation of people born into a particular caste. People in the upper caste were priests and warriors, and those in the lower caste were traditionally involved in trades and menial jobs. Upper-caste people enjoyed access to education and owned the land where landless lower-caste people toiled it. The term Dalits represents the bottom of the caste hierarchy in India and is often perceived as untouchables, impure, and doomed. In contrast, upper-caste people are considered more intelligent and good at behaving well (Thapa et al., 2021). A person from the lower caste in India is aware of their subservient powerlessness while interacting with a person from the upper caste. A person from the upper caste commands more respect than someone from the lower caste for their social position.

An individual's position within society is not static; it is ever-changing and moving. Castells (2004) observes that individuals self-consciously negotiate and transform identity and, in so doing, realign power relations. Even though upward mobility within India's caste system is impossible, people from the lower caste move up their social position through education, employment, and wealth creation. (Ranganathan, 2022). Srinivas (1956) described one such phenomenon in the Indian context as Sanskritisation, where lower caste people attempt to imitate the features of dominant upper caste communities, like religious rituals and ceremonies. Despite such a change in position, lower-caste communities undergo oppression within the caste system in the country, and upper-caste people enjoy the privileges of the caste system (Ramaiah, 2015).

A person's identity is influenced by, though not rooted in, their body image, which brings with it notions of power and powerlessness. Dominelli (2002) states that a hierarchy of body worth is established in society, and in this contest of worth, the bodies of old, disabled, Black, and lesbian women are valued least. In an Indian context, body image issues are also intensified by skin color and attire. Whiteness is an obsession among Indians, especially among women. Wardhani et al. (2018) suggest that whiteness as a form of power influences the socio-political conditions and day-to-day lives of people in India. Colorism is integrated into a person's caste hierarchy and social acceptability in Indian society. Chandra (2011) argues that whiteness and caste have propelled new regimes and power in Indian culture since the colonial period. The power of whiteness and unparalleled power attributed to higher castes while lower castes are treated as untouchables persist in different forms. The superiorities and inferiorities attributed to class and caste in India are demonstrated through several social identities, including family names, children's education, political affiliations, gender, and networks with influential people.

### **Power in Social Work Practice**

Power is often discussed as fundamental to the relationship between professionals and the society in which they operate (Tew, 2006). The rigidity of social hierarchy, equity in social relations, and various other cultural factors influence the power dynamics within professional relationships. For example, a male professional in a less developed country in the global south may show more power over their female clients than a professional in a similar situation, working in a progressive western country, where individual rights are more respected. Social

work significantly affects people's lives in many ways, such as by providing health support, offering security and safety from atrocities, and participating in community action to ensure human rights. According to Sheedy (2012), power in social work can be defined as "the control over the relationship process between the worker and clients, decision making and subjective feeling of the upper hand of one over the other. Invariably the legitimate and individual provincialities affect this relationship" (p. 41). The social worker's education, legitimate authority, control over the allocation of resources, support of the organization, and power to make decisions are some of the professional attributes that keep the worker in a position of power compared to the people they work with. Social workers' power comes from the authority of their position, as well as their education and identity. The individual attributes of the social worker, for example, their gender, social class, religion, caste, physical ability, color, family status, and physical location, may also add to their position of power. The physical objects are associated with the identity and position of the social worker and the power that these objects may imply.

Conversely, the people who seek service from social workers are presumably disempowered by their position of seeking help from another person. The client groups that social workers and agencies cater to usually belong to those social categories which are deemed to be less powerful: they may be less educated; poor; suffering from mental health challenges, sickness, or addiction; disabled; in conflict with the law; low caste; or victims of abuse (Das et al., 2021). They may include communities and groups oppressed by institutions like the government, corporations, and the wealthy and powerful. The identities and labels of these clients show they are from social, political, economic, and psychological positions that are disempowered. These scenarios establish an imbalance of power between the social worker and the client. As this discussion suggests, the power relationships between social work professionals and service users are unequal (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, social work practice is not devoid of the challenges and complexities derived from power relations (Beddoe, 2012). Due to this power imbalance, there is a binary of worth and worthlessness in the helping process. While helping others is considered highly rewarding and adds to one's self-esteem, seeking or receiving help from others may have the opposite effect, resulting in feelings of helplessness, incompetency, and worthlessness (Breton, 1999, p. 35; Constance-Huggins, 2019). As a result, the provider unconsciously builds a sense of power over the receiver of the help and explicitly or implicitly holds it over them. At the same time, the person receiving help may accept their less powerful position with the provider. The client may take this less powerful position because of acquired feelings of helplessness from their life circumstances (some of which may result from social structures) and the need for survival.

### **Power in Micro Spaces**

The social position ascribed to a person (through wealth, education, or authority) puts them in a position of superior significance or strength. Such a position could provide automatic recognition and approval to accept that person's decisions with authority (Montoya, 2022: Simmel 1986, as cited in Smith, 2010). Anyone with authority and power, including social workers, has more control over management and use of the time they spend with the service seekers. Smith (2008) refers to this as the power of lateness, where "those in positions of formal authority are less likely to be held accountable for being late, while service users may find that their lateness has

adverse consequences for the way they are perceived or treated" (p. 4). One example of such automatic recognition of power in the Indian context is the authority, respect, and sense of superiority given to social workers to make decisions on behalf of their clients. Social workers may have the paternalistic attitude that it is okay for clients to wait for them, as they are here to receive benefits from the worker. However, such actions are contrary to social work's fundamental human rights and social justice principles.

Social work is not regulated in India and does not enjoy a professional standing as it does in Western countries. (Stanley et al., 2018). Non-profit agencies, social action movements, social workers, and social work schools have contributed to a gradual recognition of social work as a profession in the country (Ranta-Tyrkko and Das, 2016). The social worker is left with minimal legitimate and professional authority and power due to the lack of licensure and treating social work as a semi-profession (Nair, 2015). The practice of social work is not regulated by standards of practice at the national or state levels. Social workers' conduct is based on their social work education, individual and professional competency, and the agency's rules. The lack of regulations limits the scope of enforcing social work practice based on standards of practice and a code of ethics.

Sheedy (2012) suggests that coercing someone into making a choice they might at first resist is another means of power. This occurs when a professional offers a range of alternatives where their preferred option (directly or indirectly) is the only reasonable choice. For example, an older person might accept a service they feel is less than adequate, withdrawing their initial resistance, as they fear they may receive even lesser if they decline the initial offer of help. This is a situation where the worker decides the choices for the client. Either the worker thinks their decision is the best for the client, or they want to provide the minimum service to their client.

A paternalistic version of professionalism would control the services as decided by the service provider. Discussions on critical social work observe that social workers have followed a dominant approach treating themselves as experts in diagnosing problems and prescribing solutions to their clients, following a dominant biomedical knowledge (Brown, C. 2021; Carniol, 1992). Unfortunately, such superiority of professionals and their agencies is accepted as usual in the Indian context. The help seekers meekly accept this inferior status imparted to them by the professionals serving them. Freire comments about the dominance of educators in his famous book, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' where pupils are considered empty vessels, and the teachers' role is to fill them with knowledge (1993). In a similar context, the social worker assumes—and the client is made to believe—that the worker is skilled, educated, and competent enough to assess the client's situation and solve their problems. The role of the helper is limited, and everything is left to the expertise of the worker.

There are explicit and implicit relations between place and power. Ratliff (2019) states that the place is fundamentally constructed by power. Place, as the primary site of power, helps understand the power dynamics operating within that space. The location of an agency's office and even the interior facilities and rooms have the potential to instil power in the client groups. While a sophisticated agency in a city's downtown generates a sense of awe among the help seekers (for people from rural areas, a visit to the town itself may be embarrassing), an agency within their community would give service seekers a sense of ownership. Even some workplace

features—for example, the furniture's elegance, the office's physical set-up, and the type of cars parked outside—can create notions of power (Vareed et al., 2022).

### **Critical Reflection by the Social Worker**

The situations and positions leading to power imbalances between the social worker and client can differ in each case. The power dynamics between a practitioner and the client shift depending on where the practitioner is in their life. It is vital for practitioners to take moments of introspection to question and explore the intersectionality within their own lives and how this will shape their work and ability to support community members effectively (Lesser, 2018). By frequently taking moments of introspection, professionals can better understand the intersections within their own lives, the lives of their clients, and the complex power dynamics within our society. This process requires "social workers to be critically aware of how the intersection of their social positions may affect their intervention and relationships with their clients who also embody a dynamic set of social positions" (Yan, 2016, p. 116). In a practical context, social workers need to be aware of the positional realities of their identities and their manifestations in their relations with their clients.

One of the ways to work with power imbalance in social work relationships is through critical reflection on one's own social location and privileges and how they influence relationships with the service users. Critical consciousness leads to understanding one's positionalities, power, and the selective biases derived from them (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This critical self-reflection needs to look deeply at the privileges, social position, and associated power of the social worker. It includes reflection on the biases the worker brings to the assessments of those they work with. Looking at this power and privilege could lead to developing deeper relationships and a greater understanding of those we are working with.

Social workers may be privileged if they are born in an upper caste, and they may develop selective biases towards people from lower castes. A person may be privileged by their family's status, which influences how they treat people from low-status families. A heterosexual man has privilege in a community, and that position could bring feelings of superiority over a person from the LGBTQ community (Sing et al., 2022). A social worker's body image and appearance generate an impression on their clients, influencing how they behave with the worker. A person's affiliation to political parties or religious groups can affect their approach to people affiliated with different political parties or religions (or none) (Choudhury & Kumar, 2022). The power and privilege that come with positions in religions are significant in the Indian context, as many of the social work programs are managed by organizations affiliated with religions.

A true critical reflection includes an assessment of the social worker's privileges and disadvantages, a process that can be uncomfortable. However, once we have deepened our understanding of our intersectionality and located our places in society, we should have greater understanding and empathy for those we assist. Continuous reflection should be directed towards the attainment of social justice in addition to meeting the immediate needs of clients. The process of self-reflection includes two related, though not overlapping, contexts: the social worker and the client have their perceptions and beliefs about the status of the other (Smith, 2010). The self-

reflection by the social worker will result in empathetic responses by the worker to the client, sharing of power with the clients, and supporting action for the clients.

Service users' perceptions of the social worker's power and intentions will impact how they conduct themselves. Most social workers in India work with less educated, lower caste, and marginalized communities (Vareed, 2021). These clients may place the authority, education, and position of the social worker at a higher level than themselves, and the client may meekly wait for suggestions or accept any decisions made by the worker. Such a process is disempowering and perpetuates the power differentials between the client and the social worker. However, social workers in the hospital, educational, and industrial settings work with people who are relatively more educated and who can make decisions for themselves or with the assistance of the worker. The country's cultural context is very diverse, and social workers' service must respect the cultural diversity of the communities and provide services accordingly.

### **Sharing Power Through Participation**

One can use power to achieve positive and negative ends, depending on how the person who holds power exercises it. Social work can be an empowering process where people are helped to identify and gain control in their own lives. This change begins with a shift from conventional and paternalistic social work towards social work as empowering. In other words, empowering the client does not occur without an honest attempt from the social worker to identify the power differentials between them and make an earnest effort to mitigate it in the helping process. Critical social work proposes to change the way social workers redefine their relationships based on their perceived expert knowledge and devaluing the expertise and lived experience of their clients (Daftary, 2020; Dominelli, 2019; WAI TAK Chan, 2018).

Sheedy (2012) observes that power imbalances between service providers and users are exacerbated when there is limited participation. Engaging clients in the helping process is a means for sharing power in social work. This process includes the stakeholders in the decision-making process and shares ownership and expertise with them. The role of power in social work requires a shift to sharing power with those who use these services. Such power-sharing assumes that clients are the best resources to solve their problems, and they would participate in the creation of the services that they want to consume (Riessman, 1990; Breton, 1999). While discussing the problem-posing approach in education, Freire (1993) suggests that people have the solutions for their problems, and educators should pose the issues to them critically. Such education leads to the liberation of oppressed people. The problem-posing approach to the clients and seeing clients as resourceful have significance in social work (Hegar, 2012). Critical social work recognizes that clients and practitioners bring partial knowledge and work together in the helping process (Brown, 2021a). In this way, service users are not only consumers but active co-producers in the process. Social work approaches such as mutual aid groups, coproduction, community engagement, and participation are examples of sharing power with service users. Research shows that community engagement practices in India by the government and non-profit organizations help to share the power of the authorities and workers, a process which leads to empowering the community and its members (Baiju, 2015; Rajesh, 2020; UBA-IIT Delhi, 2018;). Social work agencies follow various participatory methods, including rural appraisal and community awareness programs to engage with communities in the helping process.



### Multiple Ways of Sharing Power

Social workers must use their information, knowledge, critical reflection, and communication skills to demystify the basis of their power and encourage strategies for power sharing with clients (Dominelli, 2002). Social workers need to identify and apply methods to deconstruct power relations with their clients. Such practices include respecting informed consent; giving choices to clients; shared planning; identifying with clients through appearance and physical positioning; avoiding victim blaming; and using transparency and non-threatening language (Carniol, 1992; Hick et al., 2010; Mullaly & Dupre, 2019). The growing literature on anti-racist social work practices, anti-oppressive approaches, and those premised on liberatory principles confront the myriad ways of oppression and advocate a shift in power relations and focus on social justice (bodhi, 2022; Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). The two forms of social work approach developed in India with decolonial, and anti-oppressive perspectives are tribal social work and Dalit social work (bodhi, 2022; Yesudhas, 2012). Tribals are the Indigenous people categorized as scheduled tribes in India, one of the country's most backward communities. Dalit refers to the backward communities in India. that include scheduled tribes, scheduled castes, and other lower castes.

In clinical work, the client and social worker develop a collaborative therapeutic alliance between both parties (Morgan, 2007). Mutually shared understanding and ideas foster this alliance more than coercive force or authoritarian control of one over the other (Herman, 1992). Therapeutic intervention is effective only when a relationship exists between the therapist and client without perceived power imbalances. Brown (2021b) argues that feminist narrative approaches accept the reality of two subjects in a therapy session—the client and the therapist—who are involved in ongoing collaboration in work. This challenges the dominant discourse on the authority and power of the therapist and accepts the client as an equal partner in the helping process.

Language is not merely a medium of exchange but represents power in the way it imposes specific meanings. The use of language can have negative impacts and create barriers to access to social services, and skilled, empathetic, and culturally competent use of language is required in social work practice (Doering-White et al., 2020). Language is never neutral, and the terms used have significant meanings in social work that, when analyzed, reveal power imbalances (Clapton, 2018). A social worker's choice of words and body language can carry several connotations, including power, empathy, compassion, and understanding. Professionals often use jargon and abbreviations in the helping process; however, this language is usually unnecessary for the work. Using complex vocabulary can create feelings of helplessness and inferiority in the clients and a sense of superiority for the social worker, which contributes to the social worker's power over the client. While jargon could be seen as a deliberate attempt to gain control and power over the client, using language the client understands leads to shared power with them (Lee et al. 2019). Communicating with the client in a language they know, and reconfirming their comprehension, can reduce the power imbalance in the helping process.

Proponents of structural social work argue for democratic, egalitarian, and feminist approaches to working with people (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1990). One of the ways to share power is to provide choices for the clients, including the time and location of meetings. Often social workers work at office hours fixed by their agencies, which may not be at convenient

times for their clients. Those who seek help from a social worker are mostly from marginalized communities and may be employed during typical social work hours; for example, farmers work in the fields during the day when most agencies operate. Social workers need to work with the clients at a time convenient for the service users. Informed consent by sharing the assessment of the work and plan of service with the clients also transfers the worker's power to the clients. Social work agencies may have limited resources available to serve their clients. An open discussion about available resources, the potential for these resources to address complex and diverse client needs, and access to these resources would help to transfer the knowledge and power to decide for the client. This process moves the service from the default—set within the agency's mandates and determined by the social worker's expertise—to a customized service where the worker develops solutions and provides resources by considering each client's specific needs.

### **Conclusion**

Social work is a helping profession that can empower and change people. However, the power dynamics in social worker–client relationships can adversely affect the helping process. The client's perspective of the social worker's power comes from the social worker's ability to provide service; influence decisions about resources; and determine the conditions of the service, including the time and location of meetings. In the Indian context, people with education and position are treated with respect, while those seeking services usually meekly hand over control to those who provide the service. As social workers are seen to hold power to provide support and resources, clients seeking help allow social workers to make unconditional and indisputable decisions for them. The social worker must reflect upon their identity critically and be conscious of their privileges and power, which help to initiate a genuine and empathetic relationship with people positioned at disadvantaged positions. In other words, the worker shall not exert their power over clients but rather work with clients so that they experience support, change, and growth.

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