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## POWER, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

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<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	iii
<b><u>Introduction: Power, Poverty and Inequality</u></b> <b><u>Patta Scott-Villiers and Marjoke Oosterom</u></b>	1
<b>Inequality, Power and Participation – Revisiting the Links</b> John Gaventa and Bruno Martorano	11
<b>Why Invisible Power and Structural Violence Persist in the Water Domain</b> Lyla Mehta	31
<b>Inclusion as an Agenda for Transformative and Sustainable Change: Addressing Invisible Power through Reflective Practice</b> Jo Howard with Violeta Vajda	43
<b>Intersectionality: A Key for Men to Break Out of the Patriarchal Prison?</b> Jerker Edström with Satish Kumar Singh and Thea Shahrokh	57
<b>Towards a Pedagogy for the Powerful</b> Andrea Cornwall	75
<b>Why Citizens Don't Engage – Power, Poverty and <i>Civic Habitus</i></b> Jethro Pettit	89
<b>Power and Empowerment Meet Resistance: A Critical, Action-Oriented Review of the Literature</b> Rosie McGee	103
<b>Power in Practice: Bringing Understandings and Analysis of Power into Development Action in Oxfam</b> Jo Rowlands	119
<b>Glossary</b>	131

# Introduction: Power, Poverty and Inequality

**Patta Scott-Villiers and Marjoke Oosterom\***

**Abstract** Ten years on from the landmark 2006 issue of the *IDS Bulletin* that brought us the ‘power cube’ – a practical approach to power analysis that offers a way of confronting its complexity – we return to the question of how to analyse and act on power in development. We focus on the ways in which invisible power helps perpetuate injustice and widen inequalities. The contributions call for ways to denaturalise norms and structures of social, political and economic inequality, so that the universal aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals may have a chance of success. This editorial presents contributors’ recommendations for how to reverse the negative effects of invisible power through unsettling the normal and making visible the unacceptable. We end by analysing the conditions under which these activities might be successful and find that change is accelerated when connected spaces at every political level are considered and economic, political and social cleavages are acted on in concert.

**Keywords:** power, invisible power, inequality, intersectionality, norms.

## 1 Power and inequality

This *IDS Bulletin* is about power and inequality. It focuses in particular on the workings of power in the reproduction of norms, values and structures that produce or mitigate inequality. We ask how understanding the least visible kinds of power can help us to tackle the damaging aspects of inequality, be it injustice, misrecognition, poverty or disenfranchisement.

In 2006, John Gaventa wrote about an approach to analysing power in society in the *IDS Bulletin*, using a rubric named the ‘power cube’ (Gaventa 2006). Since that time the approach, a lens on power, has shed light on many different situations at many levels, and its capabilities have been tested in academic and practical realms. Ten years on, we look at what we have learned, in particular about ‘invisible’ power. Stephen Lukes identifies three dimensions of power: decision-making power, non-decision-making power and ideological power (Lukes 1974). While decision-making power can be observed in the way it ties visible actors (people and institutions) to visible actions and policies,



non-decision-making power operates in the ways that powerful bodies are able to keep certain issues and ideas on or off the agenda in a given decision space. In this *IDS Bulletin*, we pay attention to Lukes' third dimension, ideological power, which he termed 'the most insidious form of power'. It secures people's consent to be dominated, through the generation of norms to which they may become habituated, even when it is against their interests. Such power is invisible, difficult to reverse and is one of the most challenging facets of power analysis (Veneklasen and Miller 2007).

In this brief editorial, we introduce invisible power in relation to inequality, outline how it figures in the contributions to this issue and consider the authors' suggestions as to how it can be denaturalised and challenged. We draw out a common thread that suggests that invisible power is brought into the light and becomes available for change when it is brought into discussion. Thus, we briefly examine what this means and what conditions might be important for moving from discussion to structural and behavioural changes.

Gaventa and Martorano begin this *IDS Bulletin* by asking how power works in the relationship between economic and political inequality. They show that with economic inequality comes political inequality – those who have less material and financial capital usually have less political capital, their voices have less weight, their networks are less influential and their material capacities to intervene are far weaker than those of the property-owning classes. They conclude that managing these interacting forms of inequality is a matter of politics. It is in politics that decisions about redistributing wealth, equalising citizenship, and resolving social conflicts are made (Fraser 1997).

Gaventa and Martorano also point out that politics is done in interacting formal and informal realms that are in constant operation at global, national, local and household level. Others in this issue note the ways in which economic and political modes of inequality interact with social inequalities of gender, race, sexuality and other ascriptions to create yet more inequality. This confronts the policymaker with a challenge. These social inequalities, which exist both inside and outside economic and political institutions, are made possible by norms and traditions, the powers of which work invisibly as to the way things are done. The complexity often seems too tangled to unravel, and our understanding and responses often feel inadequate. Nonetheless, our contributors offer ways of untangling this complexity using approaches to analysis which take account of multiple dynamics in unequal relations.

## **2 Invisible power**

Invisible power involves the internalised, often unconscious acceptance of dominant norms, institutions, languages and behaviours as natural and normal, often desirable, even if they appear to be against the interests of the actors involved. Acceptance helps to perpetuate an unjust *status quo*. This aspect of power helps explain how certain matters

are, for long periods of time and in many places, not on the agenda for discussion and unchanged, because they are naturalised: unnoticed and satisfactory. Invisible power presents an analytical conundrum, since it is, by definition, out of sight. Usually its influences are unspoken and unquestioned, and its operations defy clear articulation, first because the words or actions that will reveal its workings in a particular instance have yet to be formulated, and second because the words and actions are proscribed. Invisible power affecting political and economic inequality is always and everywhere in operation in physical spaces, be they kitchens, streets, parliaments, factory floors or schools; and in arrangements such as elections, social movements, marketplaces or social gatherings. The power of the unquestioned and the unacceptable also operates at every level of political and economic organisation, from local to global.

The narrowing of perspective that comes with the accretion of norms, values and traditions is not always a bad thing. Institutions provide the order and predictability on which much social, political and economic interaction relies (Haugaard 2012). A form of inequality that may have started as a positive public indictment or definition of a class of people becomes a tacit norm that forbids and limits, sunk beneath the surface of individual and social consciousness. In many ways, such tacit norms of behaviour and belief are the cultures that we need to make living together straightforward. However, once beyond day-to-day consciousness, norms and values also move out of the reach of everyday criticism. It is only once they enter what Giddens called ‘discursive consciousness’ that they can be discussed, examined and challenged, and the boundaries they set and the values they engender can be ruptured or redrawn (Haugaard 2003).

In this *IDS Bulletin*, our colleagues point to some of the ways in which invisible power is being interpreted in relation to inequality and show how analysing its generation and dynamics can help illuminate responses. Much of the most useful practical and empirical work that has used the notion of invisible power has considered it as a force that holds in place a normative structure, which includes norms of negative discrimination and inequality. In this issue, Howard with Vajda provide a textbook example of this in their examination of a ‘historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism’ in the Western Balkans, in which even those who try to overturn it find themselves complicit in its reproduction.

An important strand of thinking on how invisible power becomes embedded in structure is exemplified by Mehta’s article (this *IDS Bulletin*). It shows how internalised normalisation of a *status quo* contributes to what Johan Galtung termed ‘structural violence’, in which social arrangements systematically damage specific persons within a population and result in inequalities and injustices (Galtung 1969). The structure exerts a force that sustains internalised acceptance among the powerful and powerless alike. Mehta shows that unequal access to clean water has been naturalised in global discourse, even

though insufficient and contaminated water leads to early death, ill-health, time poverty and exhaustion for millions of poor rural women and people living in the slum areas of the world's major cities. She explains how invisible power assists in reproducing the exclusion of a substantial proportion of humanity from what should be a universal right. Even though the tendency to reproduce and naturalise exclusion has been the subject of considerable critique and action over decades, it is remarkable then how strongly the process of naturalisation seems to continue to have a hold on all of us. This points yet again to the remarkable power of normality to make invisible extreme inequalities that exclude large numbers of people from universally accepted rights.

On perceiving that exclusion is neither natural nor necessarily desirable, many of us, like the 'white people' described by Howard with Vадja, make a logical turn towards inclusion as an answer. However, invisible power continues to operate as hitherto marginalised populations are recognised and invited into the spaces of the powerful (Land 2015). While they may be present, in an apparently open or welcoming space, the internalised forms and norms still constrain their voice and participation and give precedence to those to whom society has given dominance. Here they may find equal status in some modes, for instance as voters, women or workers, but not in all aspects of equality – millions of women of colour who work and vote continue to suffer structural violence, and growing masses of informal sector workers are still subjected to abusive conditions and unequal services with limited recourse to justice. Invisible power continues to label and position people in a taxonomy of differential entitlement, even as they are welcomed into citizenship, the market economy and multicultural society (Ahonen *et al.* 2014; Hickey and du Toit 2007; Phillips 2011).

Many people on low incomes across the developed and developing world *expect* to get a worse deal from state, society and market than those on higher incomes; they seem to conspire with real but invisible social boundaries limiting what they can do or say, the spaces they can and cannot enter and the social validity of their knowledge (Hayward 1998). Jethro Pettit in this *IDS Bulletin* looks at how this works from the point of view of people on low incomes who stand aloof from formal political processes as far as they are able. Drawing on Bourdieu, he develops the notion of *civic habitus*, by which he shows the calculus of so many who understand well how current norms devalue the equality of their citizenship, and who therefore both choose, and are forced, to abstain from political participation while struggling to make economic progress and maintain social standing (Bourdieu 1990). They may appear politically passive and can hardly be said to be using agency to call the powerful to account and transform the conditions of their adverse incorporation, yet their abstention is also an active withdrawal of consent for the structures that bear upon them. This withdrawal of consent is another manifestation of power. It indicates how, as James C. Scott has shown, there are compensations in silent resistance (Scott 1985, 1990).

The social norms that are embodied through invisible power are not independent of one another and the beliefs and behaviours that they engender interact to create patterns of normality, around which certain actions come to make sense. Intersectionality, as an approach to unpacking invisible power as it acts on real lives and real communities, offers a sense of realism while adding to the challenge of complexity. For instance, the intersection of racism, sexism (and class) that normalises violence against women of colour has been an ongoing problem for more than two centuries and has long been recognised by feminists and equal rights activists (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), but it still continues. Intersectionality's complexity presents a difficulty to those who want to stop the way people are defined by, and trapped in, recursive webs of harmful norms. One norm may be noticed while another continues to operate to keep the discrimination going. This separating of norms that co-create one another may be put down to a positivist tendency to attempt to bracket a given norm, say gender, in order to be able to bring it into the light and deal with it.

However, we can see, as the article by Edström with Kumar Singh and Shahrokh in this *IDS Bulletin* demonstrates in relation to patriarchy from a masculine perspective, that bracketing makes little sense with norms that are intersectional in their origins and in their continuous reproduction. Bracketing dislocates the norm from the ecology in which it grows. The very act of naming and illuminating one or several norms involves the invisible power of intersecting norms over the one who names and the community into which she or he is speaking. Edström *et al.* also argue, however, that not all intersecting norms are equivalent, and that certain normative stances develop particular power in their reproduction. He argues that patriarchy emerges as a fundamental organising principle in society, to which, to various degrees, other norms owe their shape.

Invisible power also produces structures that in turn reproduce its power. These structures are manifest in institutions and organisations, including in the labyrinths of bureaucracy and the strictures of legal systems. Bureaucracies can be understood as ways of ordering society, but also as ways to subjectify (Foucault 1995) and create helplessness among those who have to encounter them, get something from them or be directed by them (Clegg *et al.* 2016). This 'Kafkaesque' vision of the function of bureaucracy is disturbing, since it forces us to think beyond the idea that there is someone that is acting powerfully rather than a system in which we are all captured (Haugaard 2016). We are forced to appreciate that it is not actually possible most of the time to neatly separate those who dominate and are dominated, so our ability to apply systematic ideas of normativity and resistance (even intersectional normativity) is called into question. It points to the possibility that those who suffer the negative effects of this kind of invisible power will be hard put to resist or change it. But change does happen. It has been suggested that the situation calls for disturbance of the power-infused structure itself, 'provok[ing] people to begin to "see" what is ordinarily out of view' as Cornwall puts it in her article in this *IDS Bulletin*.

The way to deal with it, she suggests, is not simply to reveal that which was invisible, but (in a glorious mix of metaphors derived from Edström (2014) and hooks (2004) respectively) to 'undress' the pernicious social pathology that has infected the whole body.

'How does one resist a network of boundaries that limits what is socially possible?', asks McGee in her article in this issue, drawing on Hayward's proposition that power is the ability to define the boundaries of possibility (Hayward 2000). In considering what resistance studies can offer to power theory and vice versa, McGee argues that resistance scholarship has much to offer. She points out that acts of resistance have a quality of persistence that can de-legitimate and eventually erode normatively constructed structures and behaviours. Resistance has negative and positive forms. A person may resist being made an abject subject, but she may also make an *alternative subject* of herself or her group (Akinwumi 2012). McGee notes that no system of power can kill off the power of the imagination to think a world differently (Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall 2008). The resisting imagination emerges as yet another form of invisible power. Imagination leads people to see what has not yet been seen and speak that which has not yet been spoken.

### 3 From tacit to discursive consciousness and beyond

The invisible power we have explored briefly here has emerged as normative, embodied, structural, intersecting, boundary-setting, resistant and imaginative. It operates as much in the mind and tradition as through emotions and practical know-how. Haugaard calls this kind of understanding, which exists below the surface of individual and social consciousness, tacit knowledge (Haugaard 2012). Following Foucault and Kant, he notes that 'the courage of constant questioning' means a continuous effort to move knowledge from the 'taken-for-granted realm' to a realm in which situations are discussable, namely to 'discursive consciousness'. We would add here, following Pettit (this *IDS Bulletin*), that to be fully comprehended such understanding also needs to enter embodied consciousness, i.e. emotional and affective realms. Practical, unquestioned knowledge about how things work in a given society or place can be brought into the light, questioned and denaturalised. If we accept this move, then we need to go further and ask what could make denaturalisation effective in clarifying, amending and then changing norms.

Each of the articles in this issue suggest means by which tacit understandings of what is bearable, useful and fair can be brought into question. The main thread here concerns the potential for action by those in civil society, social movements or positions of authority who, as Gaventa put it in 2006 'want to change power relations, e.g. to make them more inclusive, just or pro-poor'. Gaventa and Martorano (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that if the trend towards increasing economic and political inequality is to be reversed, such people need to understand the power that is keeping the current trajectory on course. They explain how the power cube lens, including, but not exclusively, its focus on



invisible power, can show how changing inequalities reconfigure power. They suggest that clarity on these changing configurations of power is vital for informing our strategies for challenging these inequalities. The power cube lens helps broaden the discursive consciousness so that it becomes aware of the different formal and informal political moments in which inequality is sustained or resisted and challenged. From this broader view come more strategic entry points at multiple levels, encompassing not only policy change, but also strategies to change norms and values. One way of achieving this latter objective, they suggest, might be to create alternatives that help prefigure a different way of living together well.

Discursive consciousness and strategy is not enough to ensure success for those who seek justice, of course. Gaventa and Martorano (this *IDS Bulletin*) point out that the same inquiry can just as well open up new strategies for those who benefit from inequality as for those who suffer it. Thus, they point to the necessity of looking for and strategising towards tipping points when internalised acceptance simply cannot hold out against new ideas. Mehta (this *IDS Bulletin*) too argues for critical mass in bringing the effects and processes of hidden power to light, in order that structural violence in the water domain may be halted. She suggests that it will be consistent ‘naming and shaming’ of powerful people and the forces that keep them benefiting from inequality that will bring about realisation of this universal right.

Rowlands (this *IDS Bulletin*), in her article about the adoption of ever-more sophisticated forms of power analysis within Oxfam, a large international non-governmental organisation (NGO), is specifically concerned with how those who want change for others should proceed in the light of insights into power. Power analysis offers the possibility, she argues, of understanding how relations that keep women and men poor or marginalised might be changed and their quality of life improved. She also argues that a systematic analysis of power relations opens up entry points for intervention in the informal as well as formal institutions that reproduce unequal life chances. This is not something that is achieved in one round of analysis, however. She points out that much understanding of power is gained through being materially engaged in a power-laden process: ‘you often don’t know how power really works until you fully engage with it’, she says.

Importantly, Rowlands also addresses the power dynamics of power analysis itself. She shows how invisible power inflects the uptake of power analysis, changes its pace and structures how it is deployed. These complications add to the time and attention it requires, since it implies that staff should analyse their own power dynamics as much as they analyse the world they wish to change.

Howard with Vajda (this *IDS Bulletin*) are also reporting from within an aid agency setting, describing and drawing conclusions about a process of reflective practice undertaken with members of the Swiss Agency

for Development and Cooperation in the Western Balkans. We can see that discursive consciousness of difficult issues does not emerge full-fledged, it is nurtured into the light through different techniques of the-self-in-relation-to-the-other and it takes time and commitment. 'Inequitable power relations', they say, 'requires attention from those who are discriminated and those who discriminate', suggesting that it is through the encounter of people who are in social contention (even as they are trying to cooperate) and who had hitherto been interacting in ways controlled by invisible power, that discursive consciousness begins to shift from concern, to awareness, to change. They note the degree to which profound emotions will play a part in the process of encounter and reflection, creating discomfort, but also energy to proceed.

Cornwall's (this *IDS Bulletin*) approach to developing consciousness and change in a patriarchal bureaucratic setting begins with making the invisible visible and destabilising old meanings. She suggests discussing with colleagues what has been taken for granted: for instance, 'what makes a man a man?' She suggests anthropological strategies that 'make strange' combined with participatory methods that 'make visible'. Her strategies encompass ways of deconstructing rules of social interaction and social positioning with interested colleagues and students, and situating these within a broad structural analysis of privilege and power. She goes on to mention ways of unsettling harmful norms in the everyday life of the organisation, for example through artful ways of behaving before and during meetings, a strategy that itself had been born in a storytelling exercise with her colleagues. Finally, she turns to the seeds of a negotiation strategy, offering the powerful a moment to envision the pleasures of being good.

Edström *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) also speak of a process of realisation achieved through reflection, using the notion of intersectionality as a conceptual tool to help pro-feminist men living in poverty to engage with gendered power. He argues that this new, more detailed lens is enough to generate more realistic and thus actionable insight. This realism is also achieved in applying the analysis to real everyday concerns and micropolitics, reminding us of a Freirean popular education approach (Freire 1972). Edström *et al.*, like others in this *IDS Bulletin*, note that it is not only a pedagogy of the oppressed that is needed but also of the powerful, an idea generated by Robert Chambers (2005), those who, including ourselves, ought to be undressed. He likewise is suggesting that it is at a broader level or society as a whole that we should look for normative change: both the powerless and powerful need to recognise that silent acceptance of forms of inequality and exclusion leads to their perpetuation. There is an indication here of an argument that those who want to fight inequality must create and expand discursive consciousness at multiple levels, in multiple spaces, with multiple expressions of power – just as the power cube would suggest.

Is discursive consciousness enough? If we take seriously the powers of *civic habitus* as psychosocial generators of reality, then consciousness is only

a beginning. For people who live in poverty the risks involved in calling for change are often obvious to them and their lives are generally constructed consciously and unconsciously to avoid the risk of challenging power. For people benefiting from the structures of unequal privilege, the potential losses on the one hand, and the apparent impossibility of changing anything so complex on the other, offer powerful reasons not to act. They too are embedded in lives that continuously reproduce their privilege. First therefore, we argue that critical pedagogy needs to go beyond rationality to embrace the embodied cognition and material inequality in which invisible power has so deep a hold. Second, critical and embodied cognition needs friendly spaces in which its insights may resonate at a broad scale across different communities and polities at different levels, through social movements and other coalitions of the willing. The journey from individual consciousness to normative change means working not only at the local level but moving the understanding from the private to the public sphere of a globalised world.

All of this suggests that the Sustainable Development Goals' call to 'leave no one behind', which will only be achieved through breaking the vicious circle of inequality, is more than about policy, increased action, or creating alternative economies. It is also about changing norms of what is possible, and making visible those invisible norms that have hindered our ability to imagine and create a just world.

#### Note

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