

Diving into the Power Pool

by the editors

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WHO'S GOT THE POWER? THIS IS A critical question for people seeking to create change or preserve something of value in their communities. Anyone who has lived or operated in a community for any length of time knows that there are gatekeepers and facilitators that may not be part of the formal processes in question but who must be consulted, persuaded, and otherwise worked with to ensure success. These may actually be surprisingly few in number, and they may be operating behind any number of scenes. They are the "influentials." Not knowing who they are and how they work may lead to strategic mistakes, wasted time, and even failure.

Floyd Hunter developed a discipline for mapping who might be in these pivotal roles, and published his findings in the 1953 book *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. It and other work that flows from it provide a way for nonprofits to study their own environments to identify power actors.

We won't go into detail here about the methodology, but we will provide a snapshot of three basic techniques that can be used independently or in combination to identify power actors. The following summary descriptions are excerpted from an article by Ronald C. Powers in the *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, Winter 1967 (available at www.joe.org/joe/1967fall/1967-3-a3.pdf).

1. Positional Technique: This requires identifying those individuals in a community who are in a position to exercise power. In practice, this

amounts to listing the persons in formal positions—especially public offices. A substantial amount of research has demonstrated, however, this technique does not identify all the persons most influential in community affairs—that is, those who are able to affect the outcome of most community issues.

2. Decisional Technique: This technique . . . is sometimes referred to as event analysis. Basically, the researcher determines the persons actually involved in several community issues that have occurred recently—or preferably are in process at the time of the research. Persons "involved" are those making public statements, voting to do something, attending meetings and the like. The major shortcoming of this technique is that it does not search out persons acting "behind the scenes." . . . Furthermore, such a procedure would tend to reveal more implementors of decisions than initiators of decisions. While implementors are important to the ultimate outcome, they do not play the key role of legitimation.

3. Reputational technique: In this approach . . . a list of community power actors is obtained by asking a number of knowledgeable community residents to name and rank those persons reputed (perceived) to have the most social power. Usually, information is sought on several issues (such as health, education, and industrial development) which may have arisen during the last two to five years.

The reputational approach usually involves two major steps. The first step is to interview several knowledgeable, obtaining their percep-



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tions of who are the influential persons in the community. These data are then summarized and, at the second step, all the persons who have been named two or three times, for example, are interviewed to obtain their rankings of the persons already named. Each is given the opportunity to add others who they perceive to have equal or greater social power than they have. Social scientists have labeled this two-step procedure and variations on it the “snowball” or “cobweb” technique. The study of social power by this reputational technique may identify past, present and anticipated power.

Many mix the decisional and reputational techniques to map the power actors while using the simple data on positional power. This mix should provide the user with a view of the

“pyramid of power” that exists within a community. There is, of course, some additional complexity in that:

- There are generally a number of power pyramids in a single community (depending on what you look at), and these will generally overlap with the larger pyramid; and
- Power is dynamic, and therefore the analysis should be redone every few years to ensure that changes are documented.

One story in Floyd Hunter’s book discusses the dynamism question by looking at two men rated highly as influentials in the city he studied. The first, Delbert, was involved in many more decisions than the second, but the second, Homer, was seen as more powerful by other decision makers. Hunter describes the differ-

On the Use of Power Analyses

by Rick Cohen

No one at the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) or the Enterprise Foundation probably knew it, but during my employ with both organizations, I freely and frequently used the techniques of community power structure analysis in my work.

While studying political science at Boston University in the 1960s, I was introduced to the work of Floyd Hunter and his 1953 book, *Community Power Structure*, examining “Regional City,” which everyone knew to be Atlanta. His “reputational” method for identifying community power brokers and his pyramidal community power analysis provided powerful tools and images for anyone interested in effecting community change.

I was certainly one interested in community change, employed at the time as a work-study planner at the local community action agency (Action for Boston Community Development), and creating in the aftermath of anti-war protests at BU a community education and outreach program that we named, probably less than judiciously, “Communiversity.” Working on bilingual education programs in Boston’s Chinatown or studying community dynamics in the North End, I thought understanding community power structures was fundamental. It all made obvious sense to me: if you wanted to make community change, you had to know the locations and ownership of community power. It seemed that self-evident.

If the utility to nonprofits of actually adapting and employing structured community power structure analysis techniques in their work is relatively obvious, the quality of the research that undergirds the theory—and the theory itself—actually needs to be studied and consciously adapted in a disciplined way to have its full potential effect.

This does not mean that nonprofits have to be slaves to academic theory and technique, but knowing something about the theory really helps turn a truly useful academic concept into a functional tool that lasts a lifetime, because it is so fundamental to our work. Decades after my Boston community-organizing experiences, I became a vice president in charge of the field operations of the Enterprise Foundation,¹ the community-development intermediary created by master builder (and master philanthropist) Jim Rouse, known for the Inner Harbor of Baltimore, New York’s South Street Seaport, and much more. Not long afterward, I switched from Enterprise, the nation’s second-largest community-development intermediary, to LISC,² the nation’s largest, where I was vice president for “field strategies,” essentially LISC’s in-house strategic planner and troubleshooter.

During my tenures at Enterprise and LISC, I was frequently in charge of looking at specific communities and metropolitan areas where the two intermediaries might open new programs (for

ence in this way: “Homer is from an old family of wealth in Regional City. He is the wealthiest man in the community according to most reports. He is chairman of the board of the community’s largest industry in volume of sales. Delbert, on the other hand, is the president of a large corporation but is a salaried man—with a very large reputed salary. There is a distinction made between salaried personnel and owners of enterprises in Regional City whether the salary be large or small. Delbert’s family background is also not comparable to Homer’s.”

Still, Delbert is undeniably powerful. He sits on many committees and actively uses his voice on many issues. Homer does not. As Hunter remarks, “Homer says of himself, ‘I will work on no boards or committees. I work entirely through

other men.’ His attitude on the matter is well known in the community.”

This short but vivid description of influence born of generations of wealth is pertinent to this particular issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, but there are many other variations and gradations in this discipline that will ring true to anyone who has worked in a community for any length of time.

For readers interested in a hands-on guide to the approaches mentioned in the article above, see: *Identifying the community power actors: A guide for change agents*, by Tait, Bokemeier, Bohlen, 1976, North Central Regional Extension Publication 59, published by Iowa State University Cooperative Extension Publications. Available online at: www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/publications/NCR59.pdf.

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example, I led teams looking at the feasibility of Enterprise Foundation partnerships in Denver, St. Louis city/county, and Charleston SC, and for LISC, I led teams looking at potential new LISC sites in several cities in Connecticut and New Jersey; for statewide LISC programs; and in Jacksonville FL, Lorain County OH, Minneapolis and Duluth in Minnesota, and Cincinnati and Hamilton County in Ohio and across the river in northern Kentucky). For LISC, I also took teams into existing sites to examine why programs weren’t functioning well or to determine how to reassess a local LISC strategy, in places such as Little Rock, Detroit, Miami/Dade, and the LISC program in the Mid-South Delta including parts of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Three decades after being escorted out of Boston University with a John Silber-directed, court-ordered injunction banning me from the campus, I was drawing on the community power structure analysis techniques I learned in BU’s political science department. In Enterprise and LISC “expansion assessments” and in LISC strategic reassessments, we had to figure out whom to talk to about whether there would be community support for an intermediary’s program, how the community would react to the outside organization’s intervention, which people ought to be involved because of their influence and power to make the community-development program successful. Similar questions applied for the reassessment studies: what did various segments of the community think about the LISC program, who was willing to pitch in and help, which “community levers” might need to be pulled to put the program on a better course?

It always helped to use a community power structure lens. By

identifying leaders in different parts of the community through the reputational, positional, and decision-making methods, we got to figure out iteratively whom we needed to talk to, learn from, connect with, and sometimes draw in to make the determination of whether to go ahead with or how to remedy local LISC and Enterprise efforts. (Remember, Hunter never said that there was one, unitary power structure for Atlanta, but several—as there are for most communities; in the LISC and Enterprise examples, we were looking at power and influence relating to housing and community-development issues, which took in some leadership circles, overlapped with others, and differed substantially with still more).

What did this almost invariably produce? For the expansion or reassessment teams, it helped ensure that we were reaching and getting the perspectives of the relevant parts of the community-development leadership, the real influentials and decision-makers in government, in the private sector, among funders, and in neighborhoods, in addition to those of the nonprofit community developers. We would uncover people whose insights would virtually demand that they automatically be drawn into the intermediaries’ programs to put them on the right footing with key influentials at various levels. While the reputational and positional techniques helped flush out the key players at various levels of the communities, the decision-making lens helped us better understand how the communities actually worked, how issues were dealt with and resolved, and where the balances or imbalances of power really lay.

In retrospect, it is sort of still stunning what some of these studies (done in the late 1980s through 1998, when I left LISC to join NCRP)