

IDENTIFYING POWER ACTORS AND POWER STRUCTURES

Social scientists have developed methods for identifying power actors and power structures in order to study them. The four major methods are:

- Positional
- Reputational
- Event analysis or decisional
- Social participation or social activity approach

Each is different and will identify slightly different power actors, although in some cases there is considerable overlap in the individuals identified. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

The Positional Method

Assumptions

- Power rests in important positions in key formal organizations.
- Individuals in these positions of authority are power actors.
- Key organizations are those which control resources and have influence.

Procedures

- First, identify the key organizations in the community.
- Then, identify the people in authority within the organizations.

Advantages

- Easy to conduct the study.
- Power actors are easily identified.
- Little cost in time or money.

Disadvantages

- Many people in positions of authority do not use their power; hence they are not power actors.
- Method overlooks power actors not occupying formal positions of authority.
- Does not identify power actors behind the scenes.

The Reputational Method

Assumptions

- Individuals who have and exercise power acquire a reputation of having power.
- Power actors know who they are — personally or by reputation.

- Knowledgeable people know who the power actors in the community are, by their reputations.

Procedures

- Identify the knowledgeable people in the community.
- Interview them about reputed power actors.
- The frequency with which an individual is named is a measure of his/her relative power.

Advantages

- Method identifies hidden power actors, as well as those in positions of authority.
- It distinguishes those who do exercise power from those who can but do not.
- It can identify both general power actors and those active only in specific areas.
- Relatively rapid, low-cost, and easy to use.

Disadvantages

- “Knowledgeables” might not actually know who the real power actors are.
- Apparent power actors might have a reputation but no real power.
- People might be identified as power actors who have social status rather than social power.
- Reputational lag: power actors who no longer exercise power but have the reputation are identified; new power actors who have not developed a reputation might not be identified.

The Event Analysis or Decisional Method

Assumptions

- Power is acquired through participation in decision making, i.e., through the exercise of power.
- Actual participation is the real indicator of power.

Procedures

- Select several key community decisions, either from the past or present.
- Determine, from as many sources as possible, who was involved in the decision-making process, what they did, and how important it was.
- On the basis of these decisions, identify as power actors those who participated most actively in the most decisions.