

## **On the issues of power in the family and family therapy**

Barbara Józe fik

Jagiellonian University Medical College, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,  
Laboratory of Psychology and Systemic Psychotherapy

### **Summary**

The issue of power is an important area of reflection in family and couple therapy, as well as a frequent object of practical impact. The article focuses on two fundamental perspectives showing power as a complex phenomenon: systemic and gender, which in combination allow a more holistic approach to the issue. The article discusses the contemporary systemic approach to the discussed problem by outlining the limitations associated with the early understanding of circularity and neutrality. On the other hand, it presents a gender perspective – increasingly visible in family therapy – which emphasizes the cultural discourses of femininity/masculinity, recognizes the privileges and limitations associated with them, and describes the inequalities of the position of women and men in society reproduced in relationships and in the family. In this sense, the struggle for power, usually translated into difficulties in the family, is not only an expression of the difficulties of the couple, related to experiences from families of origin, but also reflects cultural messages, internalized expectations about relations between sexes and their functioning in gender roles.

**Key words:** power, family therapy, gender

*Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told.*

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a woman's life*, New York: Norton; 2008, p. 43

### **Introduction**

Power is an issue that has represented a subject of theoretical reflection and postulated therapeutic interventions since the beginning of the development of a family therapy system. Many creators of family therapy, especially representatives of strategic, interactive-communication and structural approaches, have indicated the key role of power in family relations, highlighting that almost every relation is based on the desire to obtain balance in this area [1, 2]. Although family therapists believe that the distribution of power is a “central aspect of family dynamics” [3, p. 441], the idea itself

and its understanding is controversial. Difficulties arise during attempts to define the phenomenon. In sociology and political science, power is generally described as the relation between two people, an individual and a group or between two groups, consisting in a lasting and institutionalized influence on the behavior of the second party, while ensuring means that enable the behavior to be controlled [4]. In this sense, power means the ability to influence the behavior of other people, to impose one's will on them, force them to behave in certain a way, take specific actions or to refrain from them.

Issues of power in family therapy and in family have rarely been subject of papers and research undertaken by Polish psychotherapists. There is a significant difference in this respect when compared to the situation of American and Western European psychotherapists, who have studied those issues for many decades (especially in the 1990s) revealing the complexity of power relations and inequality between sexes stemming from socio-cultural conditioning. These research projects, together with the results of gender studies, increased the awareness of the significance of power issues in family and helped to define guidelines for therapeutic work [5]. Intensive socio-cultural changes of the recent decades in our country resulting, among others, in the changes in definition of gender-related roles confront therapists with new challenges. These require not only an in-depth reflection over the phenomena occurring within family relations but also over psychotherapists' own beliefs on these issues.

The aim of this paper is to describe the issues of power from the perspective of family therapy theory and practice as well as gender studies in relation to research, also those conducted by Polish sociologists, that illustrate various dimensions of power relation significant for family therapy. Issue of power in family relations is very broad and therefore due to the constraints of this article's framework, only a selection of perspectives will be presented. In the present article, power within a relationship and family is, after Knudson-Martin and Mahoney [6], understood and defined as a possibility to influence wellbeing, needs and goals of the other person.

### **Linearity versus circularity**

For systemic family therapy, with its circular understanding of family relations, the issue of power represents a challenge. The assumption of circularity in all interactive processes means that it is difficult to unequivocally define the relations of power, as it is assumed that each action has a return effect on the person who acts [3]. This was precisely described by Bateson, who wrote that, "perhaps there is no such thing as unilateral power. After all, the man 'in power' depends on receiving information just as much as he 'causes' things to happen" [7, p. 486].

From a historical perspective, two approaches to the concept of circularity in systemic thinking can be distinguished. In the first one, dominant in the initial development period of family therapy<sup>1</sup>, the above assumptions are interpreted literally,

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<sup>1</sup> This covers the period from the mid-1950s until the mid-1980s. It is also defined as the period of first-order cybernetics due to the focus on understanding relations appearing in the family taking into account the relationship between the psychotherapist and the family only to a small extent.

which influences the examined topics, including the issue of power in relations and the way of conducting family therapy. One result of this was the insufficient recognition of violence in family relations. Analysis of interaction sequences (context) in which violent behavior appeared took away, in a certain sense, the responsibility of those using violence against their family members. This way of understanding the circular patterns of interaction was criticized in particular by feminist researchers, who noted that it resulted in a lack of recognition of various forms of violence in family relations (physical, mental, economic and sexual). This made it impossible to effectively influence violence-related behavior and the phenomenon was therefore reinforced [8, 9]. Circularity regarded as a relational 'dance' between participants with equal rights was hindered by the conclusion that the participants in this dance were of differing strength and abilities to shape it. From this perspective, taking away the responsibility of an individual for violent behavior and transferring it to the victim represented a dangerous and unethical practice. Researchers also emphasized that in situations of cultural and social inequality, psychotherapists may feel relieved of the duty to take a position, recognizing a balanced division of responsibility, which reinforces the structural injustice [10, 11].

Such strong accusations forced family therapists to revise the way in which they interpreted circular processes in family relations. This meant that the idea of circular causality was no longer used in a simplified and mechanical form, reducing the responsibility of an individual for a given behavior. The change in approach resulted not only from legal regulations concerning domestic violence but also from the emergence of new areas in social sciences associated with the development of the narrative construction of reality, assimilating the work of Michael Foucault. These supplied tools for the analysis of complex dependencies between culture and the family. They enabled, among others, a more accurate identification of patriarchal aspects of culture favoring inequalities in family relations, as well as their consequences [12].

### **Culture and psychotherapeutic practice**

One achievement of family therapy developing under the influence of the above-mentioned areas is the recognition of culture as a significant area of systemic consideration, which must be taken into account during both theoretical analysis and psychotherapeutic work with individual patients. It is worth remembering that family psychotherapists have always highlighted the significance of the social-cultural context in understanding the dynamics of family relations and the occurrence of problematic behavior that. However, it was only after the work of Michael Foucault concerning power, the discourse of power, that they had a complete set of instruments to analyze the issue with regard to psychotherapy. Foucault [13–15] showed that understanding social phenomena in a given period of history is determined by the dominant discourses designating the patterns and norms of behavior. While analyzing the practice of contemporary psychiatrists and psychotherapists, he described how professionals were authorized by culture to use their knowledge through the process of diagnosis and classification. In his opinion, this 'usage' becomes 'over-usage'

due to the overall effect of labeling and preclusive practices, which are their consequences. Foucault's ideas became an inspiration for psychotherapists who identified themselves with post-modern systemic therapy, and in particular for Tom Andersen, creator of the reflecting team, Harlene Anderson and Harry Goolishian, working with the collaborative approach, and finally for Michael White and David Epston, creators of the narrative approach [16, 17]. In their papers, we can find an increasing awareness to power of psychotherapists in therapeutic relations and attempts towards its deconstruction through a minimization of hierarchy and the recognition of patients as experts in their own lives. Postulation of the position of a 'not knowing' is to safeguard against the psychotherapists forcing their own beliefs and theories, to express the resignation of the psychotherapist from the role of expert in solving problems, in favor of a common search for an understanding of the situation and a solution constructed together. In particular, the works of White and Epston [18] contain an analysis of cultural practices concerning governance, descriptions of oppression, in which people sharing the dominant cultural convictions find themselves, and their acts of deconstruction, which are also governed by professional procedures. In this context, it is not surprising that the authors resigned from the definition of their activities as narrative 'therapy', considering that it pathologizes the individual, in favor of the idea of practice, as ideologically more neutral.

### Neutrality

The work of Foucault, as well as other researchers indicating the cultural construction of social reality taking place in joint actions and the process of establishing meanings, showed the limitations that are associated with the concept of neutrality for psychotherapists. This concept, formulated by the Milan team, postulated the necessity to maintain the same level of closeness/distance in relation to each family member [19]. It was assumed that, thanks to this, the therapist takes up a meta-position in relation to the members of the family and remains in the role of expert, avoiding the risk of becoming involved in family games or coalitions with some of the family members. In this sense, neutrality was a type of technical maneuver "which allowed the therapist to maintain authority in relation to all the family members" [3, p. 187]. This shows that an important aspect of the concept of neutrality was to include it in the relation between the family and the psychotherapist. The assumption concerning the meta-position of the expert was expressed in the form of a theoretical postulate and practical guidelines as avoiding coalitions. It was displayed in the whole style of conducting therapy, for example, in the way of informing families about therapeutic interventions, which they could listen to without the opportunity to comment. Later, Gianfranco Cecchin, one of the members of the Milan team, under the influence of constructivism, resigned from the concept of neutrality postulating that the psychotherapist should maintain the attitude of curiosity accompanied by 'suspending' and questioning his/her own views [20]. This was intended to widen the awareness of the therapists with regard to their own convictions and formulated hypotheses, leaving more room to search for answers together with the family or patient [21].

The described change in thinking resulted from critical analysis which drew attention to the fact that psychotherapists, together with their theories, are a part of culture and, remaining in cultural discourses, express their values and convictions about norms [22]. Power is, therefore, inherently present in therapeutic relations, although it may be consciously weakened, as psychotherapists whose work is based on constructivism postulate. However, the assumption that full neutrality of the psychotherapist is possible seems to be a dangerous illusion, which hinders the perception of political aspects and the practical consequences of actions taken by psychotherapists.

This aspect has been and still is the subject of critical reflection of researchers bringing gender perspective into family therapy [23]. They show political consequences of psychotherapists' stance on gender-related issues, their attitude towards gender roles, as well as highlight ethical aspects related to specific psychotherapists' views and revisit the subject of neutrality as part of the reflection process.

### **Power in the family**

The issues included in the process of family therapy concern all the important aspects of life: roles in the family, ways of defining femininity/masculinity, ways of expressing closeness, autonomy and the significance of belonging, the importance of education and the development of power and control. This last area is particularly often discussed in couple therapy as well as in family sessions. Attempts to exert influence, make decisions individually or mutually may take various forms: from subtle maneuvers, in which symptoms play a significant role, through an open fight about "who rules", to acts of a violent nature, as mentioned above. The issues of power in families were particularly well explored in the strategic approach represented by Haley [1] and Madanes [24]. It was shown that in families, just as in every other group, there is a hierarchy, which means that one person has more power and responsibility than others. It was emphasized that, in western cultures, a basic element of hierarchy is the separation of generations and the assumption that parents take care of their children and control them, which is also regulated by law. Therefore, the optimal definition of hierarchy and the division of power is a basic task within a marriage.

Couples may share power in various ways. For example, one of the partners takes decisions concerning matters associated with the home and children, while the second partner deals with matters outside the home. Sometimes partners who cannot effectively solve the problem of power transfer power to their children by taking a position of helplessness. Occasionally, one partner may take all the decisions, while the other partner undermines these decisions by involving the children. In other situations, the symptoms of one partner may counter-balance the power of the other partner. When one of the couple develops symptoms, we may define two incompatible, incoherent hierarchies in the marriage. Within one of them, the partner with symptoms takes a lower position because when he/she needs help the second partner is in the role of a helper. Within the second one, we can see that the partner with symptoms has the higher position because using symptoms he/she influences the behavior of the partner who decides about the functioning of the relationship and family.

We also deal with a double hierarchy when symptoms are presented by a child. The child's symptoms and difficulties designate, for example, the way of spending time, regulate the ways of solving rivalry between siblings, and strengthen or weaken bonds with parents.

Strategic therapists associate the ambiguity of hierarchies in families with the dysfunctional aspects of the family system. They show that, besides a double incoherent hierarchy, disorders can take the form of fights between parents or children to take power. Another variant is to give responsibility to a child or another person (e.g., grandparents) or an institution. Another situation is associated with the appearance of inter-generation coalitions, in which a child and an adult cooperate together against the second adult. However, in a strategic approach, much attention is paid to restoring the optimal hierarchy, as Madanes writes: "Basically, family therapy is about the love that connects people. And that's all. It's not about power, hierarchy and paradoxical discoveries. The family is a family because the people who established it love each other, take care of each other or experienced that in the past. And when they come for therapy, they do it to renew their love or reshape their mutual relations. I am convinced that the symptoms are connected in a defined way with the inability to show love" [25, p. 159]. In this context, the fight for power appears as a manifestation of difficulties in the mutual understanding of needs, showing affection, care, understanding and respect. Such an understanding creates an attractive perspective for therapeutic work, however, it seems that the issue of power in family relations, and especially in the relations of couples, is more complex and entangled in a cultural context.

### **Gender and power in the family. The gender perspective**

Power in family relations is unavoidably associated with gender issues [26, 27]. The way of defining the roles in the family, masculinity and femininity, is linked to cultural discourses concerning gender, which define what it means to be a wife, mother, daughter, husband, father, son, attractive woman, attractive man etc. Gender, in other words the social-cultural gender, is understood as a collection of meanings, expectations and roles designated to women/men, which are constantly created and performed, creating the rules of family and social life [28]. Gender discourses, representing part of a wider culture, are carried out through social practices, communication patterns creating and maintaining the defined narration on the subject of women and men, their positions in society and the family [29]. These discourses influence the ability to set priorities in family relations, those that can be discussed and negotiated, and those which are recognized in silence and unquestioned. Power may be realized in various areas of functioning. Cromwell and Olson (1975) indicated three such dimensions in their concept [as cited in: 30]. The first one is the foundation of the relation of power, to which the authors included the degree of emotional engagement in the relationship as well as the material and non-material possessions, such as social status, culture, education, and beauty. The second dimension concerns processes associated with power, consisting of a wide range of phenomena with the goal of exerting influence on the partner. These include conversations, negotiations,

persuasion, conflicts or other behavior. They can take various forms: clear verbal messages, non-verbal behavior, hidden complex strategies, silence, and violent behavior. The third aspect is a result of the power system. This concerns the ability to use defined material possessions (e.g., car and money) and non-material ones (e.g. free time), and is expressed in the way of dividing duties (e.g., the necessity to take care of children or older family members).

The above-mentioned aspects are important for understanding the dynamics of power in couples, although, as analyses show, social-cultural norms that define what is feminine and what is masculine are often stronger while setting gender relations than other factors (e.g., economic ones).

### The significance of economic factors and engagement

Polish research shows that, while the high income of a man and his high social position directly increase his power in the family, the opposite situation does not have such a simple correlation [31]. The material advantage of a woman widens her field of choice, for example, if she wanted to leave her partner, but if she remains in the relationship, her higher status becomes problematic for both sides. Undermining the strong cultural discourse of masculine superiority and a man's ability to support the family and ensure its material security requires a redefinition of roles. This is often a source of many conflicts, and even violent behavior from men, sometimes leading to the breakup of the relationship. This data are interesting in light of American studies, which showed the same tendency, but with reference to the 1960s and 1970s, while among marriages entered into since the 1990s, the financial advantage of wives was generally not associated with an increased risk of divorce [32].

These findings are coherent with changes appearing in American society concerning the way of defining roles and the tendency for gender equality in development opportunities. The domination of the patriarchal model of marriage and family in American culture, characteristic for the earlier period, meant that deviations from this ideal threatened the identity of men and were associated with a higher risk of relationships breaking up. The erosion of this ideology and its replacement by partnership relations led to important changes. For many men, the sharing of responsibilities, support in the raising of children and mutual appreciation of the input of each side in the building of a family became values, and therefore the higher status of women was no longer a threat to their identity [33].

Interestingly, another factor that modifies the discussed dependencies is education and the professional position of men. Graduates of universities and the men with the highest income turned out to be more conservative than men from the middle and working classes. It seems that the lower incomes of men from those groups combined with the growing costs of children's education and the general cost of life have created economic pressure. This may be an incentive to renegotiate the marriage contract, resulting in greater flexibility while defining the roles in a family. Tichenor [34] based on her research showed that when women earn more it is important how a man sustains his position and power in other areas within a relationship.

Engagement in a relationship is another important factor that affects the dynamics of power in couples. The greater emotional engagement in a relationship of one partner means that the other partner obtains more power, despite the non-beneficial balance of other resources for him/her. More engaged and affectionate men give more power to their wives as they require their acceptance and love [35].

While analyzing the issues of power, it should be remembered that it has a changeable nature. Its dynamics, dependent on the social-cultural context, may change during a lifetime. Research into these complex processes reveals a wide range of interesting data. The research of Ratecka [36] shows that, in Polish families, women more frequently have power when it comes to time-consuming and less important decisions associated with daily life and care of the needs of family members. These matters require a high level of engagement and are usually handed to women. A good illustration is the management of the household budget. During financially prosperous moments, men manage household budgets, usually designating part for their needs, often without discussing this with their partners, however, they resign from taking decisions and responsibility in financially worse situations [36, 37]. Managing the budget when there is a lack of means to pay all the bills is a burden and not a source of power, and therefore does not change the traditional system of power.

#### Processes associated with exerting influence

In family and marital relations, many issues may become areas of conflict: the way of spending free time, division of duties, ways of raising children, relations with more distant relatives and friends, hobbies, sex, and problems with addictions. The research of Titkow et al. [38] showed that the majority of women (87.2%) prefer non-conflict resolution of problems. This often means that, in order to avoid disputes and maintain a good atmosphere, they take on duties and independently perform household chores without involving their partners. This is grounded in the belief that household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, are a natural duty of women, as indicated by almost 70% of the test group [39]. Despite support for the partnership family model and changes in attitude towards the roles of women and men, there is still a conviction that women should take more care of the home and children, while men should be the breadwinners [40]. As shown by Krzaklewska and Ratecka, “marriages generally recreate the established structure of gender roles through routine daily activities rather than engage in their renegotiation” [30, p. 157].

Similar results were obtained in research into family messages in the families of Polish psychotherapists, revealing a definition of roles and femininity/masculinity characteristic of a patriarchal culture: femininity is presented in private: at home, while masculinity is presented in public [41]. The results showed that messages concerning the traditional role of women in the family decreased slightly in favor of partnerships in the families of younger women compared with the group of older women. This tendency is coherent with the direction of social change taking place in Poland since 1989, as well as in other Central-Eastern European countries [42–45]. On the other hand, in families of younger men, messages concerning the necessity of women to take

care of and dedicate themselves to the family were stronger in comparison with the families of older psychotherapists. This corresponds with the results of sociological research conducted in Poland and other countries, which indicate a stronger acceptance of the traditional role of women among younger men with higher education [45, 46].

The interpretation of this phenomenon is not easy. It may be a result of the presence of educated women in the employment market being treated as a threat by men, or of the real burden of young men associated with participation in family duties and changes in the model of fatherhood. It may also be that higher education is linked to a high level of professional activity and the ability to maintain the family, which may favor the tendency to expect lower engagement of women at work in order to take care of the family [47]. Research on American hetero – and homo-sexual marriages showed that seeking consensus in situations of conflict is fostered by sense of both partners having the same position and sharing power within a relationship. The latter aspect was especially significant for heterosexual and male same-sex couples [48].

In the context of the discussed issue, it is important to consider the aspect of hidden power [47]. This type of power is difficult to observe by partners, as their behavior, ways of solving difficulties and style in which they fulfill their roles are regarded as natural, and as they are unquestioned, they are therefore not considered. Recognition of the areas that are not discussed, whose priorities are accepted in silence, is an indicator of the power system in a relationship [6, 49]. Clinical tests show that illness, the symptoms of one of the partners, may be an important element of this process.

#### Effects of the defined power system

Most research concerns the consequences of a given power system in a couple. In this sense, research most frequently concerns sharing household duties, the way of spending free time, usage of material possessions, and the appearance of violence. The results show a large difference in the positions of women and men. Researchers agree that, despite many cultural changes and with both partners working, women still dedicate much more time to household chores, care of children and older people [50]. The research works of Kotowska et al. [51] and Titkow et al. [38] show that, in Polish families, women not only do the majority of work for the family, but they are also family managers who coordinate the work and activities of others. This is expressed in the traditional definition of femininity through the role of mothers responsible for organizing family life and nutrition, defined by researchers as an “economic mother”, and masculinity through professional activity [52]. This position is often experienced as the power of women, as indicated by the explanation of men who explain their lack of desire to become involved is a result of their unwillingness to be subordinates to their wives.

When it comes to free time, it is not equally divided between the genders. It appears that men have more of it and, to a greater extent, use it for resting, meeting with friends and for hobbies. Duch-Krzysztozek [53] wrote about this as a privilege that allows the man to spend time away from the family. The difference also concerns the opportunity to use material possessions, such as cars, laptops, good telephones or other

electronic gadgets. Men have priority when using such possessions, even though they often belong to the whole family [53, 54]. One symbol of power in the family is also the occupation of household space: having one's own room, or own desk.

A phenomenon which directly expresses the power system in a couple is violence. Taking the Polish cultural context into consideration, it is worth paying attention to the relatively high social legitimation of violence, despite law regulations. The appearance of violence in a family requires its own presentation due to its complexity. Violence, however, affects both sexes but is more often manifested by men and often appears when men experience situations which are contrary to their imagination of the position and behavior of women and men. This may concern various contexts, e.g., threats to their position due to the loss of employment, the lack of professional development or the promotion of their partner.

### **Final remarks**

In the therapy of families and couples, power in relationships represents one of the most frequently discussed topics and conflicts, which are linked to the fight for power, influence the quality and comfort of life of the family members. Despite the apparently obvious nature of this issue, it concerns a very complex matter, which may be seen from many perspectives. One of them is the gender perspective, which analyses the ways in which women and men, as described by Butler [28], perform and recreate masculinity/femininity and the roles associated with them in a defined cultural context. This allows the privileges and restrictions associated with the definition of femininity/masculinity to be understood better, as well as enabling a better description of the unequal positions of women and men in society, which are recreated in relationships and families. In this sense, the fight for power in a couple is not only an expression of the difficulties of the couple associated with experiences arising out of family of origin (which also reflects cultural messages, internalized expectations concerning relations between genders and their functioning in roles). This presents the psychotherapists with important questions: to what extent are we sensitive to these issues? Can we recognize and analyze these processes? Do our convictions, the ways in which we express ourselves and how we act out our femininity/masculinity help to co-construct the process of therapy and, if yes, how? How can these convictions influence the understanding of our patients and their problems with which they enroll for therapy? And, finally, do our activities reinforce structural inequality? The answers to these questions require, on the one hand, our own work on the recognition of convictions, gender experiences and their results and, on the other hand, research and theoretical reflection.

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Address: Barbara Józefik  
Jagiellonian University Medical College  
Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
Laboratory of Psychology and Systemic Psychotherapy  
31-501 Kraków, M. Kopernika Street 21 A  
e-mail: barbara.jozefik@uj.edu.pl