



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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My Use of Power

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G M, "I have Power? If I do, I can't tell it. How can you say I have power?"

The simple reality is that every living being has power and uses it in some way. It is not an option not to have nor to use one's power – nor to be free from being affected by others' use of their power.

"The Use of Power" was the theme of a workshop held in Charleston, WV, the weekend of September 9, 1987. This paper is drawn from what happened, with some liberties taken in the account. It is not intended to be a report on the workshop.

The intent of the group was to grow in the understanding of the use of power, and to move toward being more effective in its use. It was apparent almost immediately that the scope of the theme needed to be narrowed for it to be manageable. Consequently, the group decided to focus on "My Use of My Power", looking at both constructive and destructive uses.

With the focus decided, it was necessary to work out what we really meant by the word "power". It wasn't easy to do. We ended up agreeing that power is the ability to affect and to influence the people and situations of our life. It is also to be affected and influenced, for power works both ways. Another way to express the meaning is to ask the question of one's self, "How do I attempt to get what I want?"

I need a device to describe the development of the theme in the group. I think using quotes and the letters G M (for group member) will work. Quotes without the letters will be me responding.

G M, "I don't get what I want. Maybe I don't have any power." Murmurs of assent arose from several. I decided not to pursue the matter of the accuracy of the statement at this time, but asked that we think more specifically about how we have an effect on other people and how others have an effect on us.

G M, "I can't think of a situation in which I use power although lots of people have power over me. Sometimes I use persuasion to get what I want."

"Does that usually work?"

G M, "Most of the time."

"But that isn't use of power to you?"

G M, "Not really."

As the discussion continued, it seemed apparent that intentional use of power to affect and influence (whatever that meant) was easily recognized but that unintentional use was not.

"Maybe we need to be aware that power is used unconsciously and/or subconsciously as well as consciously. Maybe there's more to affecting and influencing than we might think."

I sensed the struggles going on and gave opportunity for more intense discussion in sub-groups. Such was the nature of their discussions that I had to exercise some power of my own to bring them back together to share what had been happening.

"Who dominated in your group – and how?" I asked.

The question was unexpected. No one said anything for awhile. I waited. Then I was surprised at what was said.

G M, "How do I maintain control over me and my use of power?"

Another G M, "The word 'power' has negative connotations for me. I don't like it. I think using power is bad. It is manipulation, and I am upset when I am manipulated."

"Do you feel the same way when you manipulate?"

G M, "Sometimes, but I can often get what I want by manipulating. I don't like it, though. I think I'm not supposed to manipulate."

We had to remind ourselves that whether or not power is used is not an option. It is always being used. The options are in how power is used. That, in turn, points to the responsibility or lack of responsibility of the user. Am I responsible in my use of my power? Indeed, do I really want to be? The answers to these questions could not be dismissed easily, even though we might have liked to do so.

G M, "No matter how hard I try, or how often I try, I don't get what I want."

"You don't? Why not?"

G M, "I don't know. I guess I'm just not very powerful."

"Even if you don't get what you want, do you keep doing the same thing over and over?"

G M, "Yes, but what else can I do?"

"I want to be sure I understand – even though you don't get the result you want, you keep repeating your pattern?"

G M, "I guess I do."

"Would you give me an example?"

(I need to put this in a situation, but the examples I use will not be those given by the group. I don't want to violate their confidence. A common situation is one in which parent and child encounter each other over the child's not studying and therefore making poor grades.)

"Yes," G M replied. "My son and I clash over his homework. I can't seem to get him to do it, but I keep trying. He's going to fail if he doesn't, and I can't let that happen."

"What do you do to get him to study?"

G M, "I set times when he must study. I send him to his room – restrict him – stand over him – yell at him – try to reason with him. I've tried persuasion, reward, punishment, shaming. Nothing works. He just clams up and refused to do anything, I don't have any power over him. He's the one who has the power."

"At least you're not getting what you want?"

G H, "No, I'm not."

"And you keep doing the same things over and over – with the same results?"

G M nodded his head.

"That's a good example of repeating a pattern even when it doesn't get the desired result, but it doesn't mean that you don't have any power."

G M snorted. "I don't get him to do his homework."

"No, you don't, but you do get him to clam up and be stubborn and refuse to do his work no matter how you threaten him. You really know how to do that, don't you?"

For a moment, I thought G M was going to hit me, and I really wouldn't have blamed him had he done so. Then I saw the tension go out of his body and, with a wry grin, he said, "Yes, I guess I do, but I don't like the results I get."

"I wonder why people keep repeating patterns when they don't work?"

G M, "I don't know. I guess I do because I don't know anything else to do."

"And, of course you feel powerless under those circumstances. It seems rather pointless to continue, doesn't it?"

Everyone agreed but felt some frustration because, they said, "Doing nothing is just as pointless. So what do we do?"

"It is true that doing nothing doesn't seem to be any kind of solution in the effort to get what you want. But doing nothing is only one of the alternatives."

My statement touched off an intensive discussion summarized in the following words.

Since power is the ability to affect and influence, how do I attempt to affect and influence the people and situations in my life? My purpose, of course, is to get the results I want.

I need to acknowledge and accept that my use of my power is inevitable. I don't have the option not to use it. Everything I do, every way I act, every response I give in some way affects and influences those involved with me. I may, or may not, like the results, yet there always are results. The very fact of my living and being is power. I can't make that not so.

All my nonverbals affect and influence. A frown or a smile – a movement of my hands or shoulder – turning away and turning toward – reaching out or pushing away – any expression in any way produces some kind of reaction.

The fact of the matter is that, whether I own it or not, I am very powerful. Every person is.

The members of the group seemed to be in a rather subdued mood after the discussion. I wondered just where we would go next.

Finally, G M broke the silence. "That concept of my use of my power frightens me."

I waited for more to be said.

G M, "I'm afraid of the responsibility. I can't escape the responsibility. I can't excuse myself. I can't even take refuge in being a victim."

"We do have to face the issue of responsibility, don't we? And that leads right into the issue of my reasons for doing and saying what I do."

G M, "Reasons? Do you mean my purposes or my goals – my motives?"

"Yes, and also that I be clear with myself about my motives. Often people are not."

G M, "Why is that so important?"

“Because, just as it is true that all persons have and use power, it is true that all persons have reasons why they use their power as they do.”

Again, it seemed desirable to set up a situation to illustrate.

Suppose I recognize that I have need, desire, to be more intimate, caring, and sharing in my relationship with another person. How would – could – I use my power to bring that about?

I could tell myself I really didn't have a lot of power and that all I could do was to be prepared to be more intimate, caring, and sharing and wait for the initiative of the other person.

I could "plead my case" with the person and try to put the responsibility on him/her for seeing to it that what I wanted was provided me. And respond accordingly.

I could be intimate, caring, and sharing according to my idea of being, and demand that the other respond in kind.

I could be quite open with the other about how it was with me and what I desired. I could entrust myself to the relationship. I could express genuine caring for the other. And I could leave the other totally free to participate in the relationship in any way desired.

Anyway that I did it would be a use of my power. The outcome would be in response not only to how I used my power, but also to my reasons for using it that particular way. Ideally, I want to be in touch with my motives. I also want to be in touch with my values and priorities.

I not only want to accept that I have and use power, but also recognize how I use my power and my reasons for doing so. Inevitably, all these elements are present. I have and use power. I use it in particular ways. I have a motive for doing so.

"How do you feel about having so much power and about the responsibility that goes with its use?"

It really wasn't realistic for me to expect the group to say much in response to that question, and they didn't. I knew, though, that the concepts to which we had given expression stirred them deeply, and that each of them were applying the concepts in their own experiences. They were, as it were, trying them on for size, and finding that they fit.

I shared one last thought. "You are aware, I suppose, that, throughout the workshop, each of us has been using his/her power. We have been continually demonstrating the very things we have been discussing. You may choose to keep that thought in mind as you reflect upon what has been happening here."

I can't not use my power – some way. That's just how it is.

The group decided to make the theme of the next workshop, "The Other Side of Power" – intending to focus on their responses to power used by others to affect and influence them. Perhaps I will write a follow-up paper after that workshop.