Power, Empowerment, and Conflict: Engaging Effectively with Power in Political Settings

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Section 1: Overview

How can political social workers constructively engage with power and conflict in order to promote social change? Although a commonly used word, *power* has a variety of uses, definitions, and connotations that are explored in this chapter. Is power something held by individuals or given through a web of structures and institutions? Is power negative or positive? Is there a finite ("zero-sum") amount of power so that in order for one person or group to gain power, another must give up or have power taken away—resulting in conflict and power struggles? Or is power something that can be shared, grown, and created? Specific tools that political social workers can use to assess power dynamics in political contexts are presented.

Developing Social Work Competency
The Council on Social Work Education establishes educational standards for all social work programs in the USA. Content in this chapter supports building competency in the following areas that are considered core to the practice of social work:
COMPETENCY 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice
COMPETENCY 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice
COMPETENCY 5: Engage in Policy Practice
COMPETENCY 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
COMPETENCY 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Domains of Political Social Work	
1. Engaging individuals and communities in political processes	◀
2. Influencing policy agendas and decision-making	◀
3. Holding professional and political positions	◀
4. Engaging with electoral campaigns	◀
5. Seeking and holding elected office	◀

Section 2: Understanding Power

Power is key to social change in every society around the world. It is a central factor of human social life (1990). Eyben et al. (2006) advise that

> *… global economic and political factors are entrenching poverty and inequality and reducing the agency of citizens to influence the processes that affect their lives… [P]eople living in poverty are cut off from real avenues of power… [T]he realisation of people's rights will depend in part on forging links of solidarity between people and organisations at different*

levels so that they can better understand the dynamics of power between citizens and government, and within global and national institutions—with a view to changing them. (p. 1)

As social workers, we spend a significant amount of time learning and thinking about oppression, diversity, human rights, and privilege. Power is an important part of each of these concepts and is especially crucial for political social work. Work in the political arena involves understanding power around you, your own power, and the ability to navigate power effectively.

The assignment of power within a society—as well as an individual, group, family, or community's ability to access power—is heavily influenced by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, educational level, and access to resources. Societal structures such as the way the legal system is set up, the media's role, and the role religious institutions hold also influence the distribution of power within a society.

FURTHER REFLECTION: Social Work Code of Ethics

Read the following statement from the NASW Code of Ethics (2017). Choose at least one of the personal characteristics discussed in that statement. While power will be defined and discussed in much more detail in the subsequent sections, what are your initial thoughts about how power is distributed in the US society in terms of this characteristic?

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.

Defining Power

Definitions of power are extensive and multifaceted. Take a few minutes to consider your own experiences and definitions of power. Reflecting on this construct may help you think about how you will use power within the political arena.

SELF-ASSESSMENT: Your Own Definition of Power

Which of these ideas of power, adapted from the Institute for Development Studies (2011) comes the closest to your definition of power? (You may choose multiple responses.):

- Something held by individuals; some people are powerful, some people are powerless
- There is only a finite amount of power available, so it is a "zero-sum game"; for one person to get more power, they have to take it from another

- Power is a negative concept that is used to control others
- Power is structural and built into the systems that oversee important functions
- Power is pervasive and embodied in all relationships and discourses
- Power is fluid and it is possible for one person or group to gain power without taking it from others
- Power is a positive concept, necessary for agency and positive action
- Power is connected to your identity and the groups you belong to
- Power is connected to your relationships with others

Why do you define power in this way?

Social worker Mark Homan (2016) defines power as "the capacity to move people in a desired direction to accomplish some desired end" (p. 52). As he points out, power is essential to accomplishing any goals and, therefore, is critical to the work we do as political social workers. Other commonly used definitions of power include "the capacity to bring about significant effects: to effect changes or prevent them" (Lukes 2005, n.p.) and "the ability of people to achieve the change they want" (Hunjan and Pettit 2011). Power can also be seen as "the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections" of a society or community (Batliwala 1993, as quoted in VeneKlasen and Miller 2007). In each of these definitions, power is used to influence the actions of others in some way.

Power can be exercised both individually and collectively in many ways. Some ways that you might see power exercised in political contexts include:

1. Depriving the opposition of something they want, such as votes or the ability to do business as usual
2. Giving the opposition something they want, such as votes, endorsement, or an audience for their message
3. Electing someone who supports your issues (Bobo et al. 2010)

Characteristics of Power

Power runs the gamut from expressions that we might see as negative (e.g., domination) to those that are strength based and positive (e.g., collaboration and transformation), to those that can be seen as either. For example, resistance may have either a positive or a negative connotation, depending on the context. It is common to think of power in a negative sense; for instance, keeping people from doing something they want to do or making them do something they do not want to do. However, we also can use power positively—to create new ways to enable people to do what they want.

Power is relative, not absolute. Someone who has a great deal of power in one situation (e.g., a social worker who has the power to decide whether a client receives

services from an agency) may have little power in other situations (e.g., that same social worker may not have a say in agency policies). This distinction underscores that power is not a fixed characteristic of a person or community and is instead variable. Even in the same setting, an individual's power may vary. An elected social worker in the legislature might go from possessing a large amount of power to a small amount, if their party loses control of the majority or if they are removed from a key committee.

Power can be thought of as relational or non-relational—"power to" versus "power over" something or someone (Wartenberg 1990). Consider the following four types of power:

- **Power "over"**—the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thoughts of those who are powerless
- **Power "to"**—the capacity to act; capability
- **Power "with"**—collective action, social mobilization, and alliance building
- **Power "within"**—a sense of dignity and self-worth at the individual or collective level (Institute for Development Studies 2011)

You might find the first type of power uncomfortable, and you might instead feel more comfortable and compatible with social work's emphasis on values such as empowerment and self-determination. Yet, as social workers we may find ourselves with power over others in a variety of ways. In fact, Piven and Cloward (1971) argued that over the profession's history, social work has moved away from mobilizing our communities (power with) and toward exerting social control (power over). We can find ourselves in this role even when it is not a conscious choice on our part. For example, social workers who work on the front lines with clients helping them navigate public assistance programs may find themselves in a position where they are charged with requiring applicants to behave in ways that conform to the program's rules. This is an illustration of power "over." In contrast, we may prefer to be in a role where we can work "with" our clients to consider ways in which such rules might disadvantage the people in the community and might need to be changed.

Power can be formal, imbued due to one's specific role or position (e.g., president, governor, executive director, CEO/chief executive), or informal. While we commonly associate power with individuals, groups, families, communities, or societies who have money or status, Homan (2016) and others describe a number of other characteristics often associated with those who hold power (similar to the "power over" discussed above). These include:

- The ability to use connections to mobilize resources
- Access to information, or the ability to control whether and how information flows to others
- Knowledge of local history and traditions (you may have worked with someone who jumps in to tell everyone else the way the organization has always done things in the past)

- The authority to make or interpret laws or rules
- Access to large constituencies who depend on you in some way
- A charismatic or an intimidating personality
- Being willing to flaunt the law in a way that challenges other power sources (e.g., terrorists, criminals in some cases)

While our societal impression of power is often an individual who takes control using fear (Hunjan and Pettit 2011), Keltner (2016) argues that altruism and social intelligence are important components in helping an individual *keep* power.

Dimensions of Power

Power is stronger when it is less visible. Lukes (2005) defines three dimensions of power, each increasingly less visible than the previous dimension. As John Gaventa summarizes, distinctions between these dimensions can be described as follows:

> *Power can be the ability to act visibly in ways that affect others, but it is also the power to act behind closed doors through more hidden and invisible means. Power can be about what is on the agenda, but also what is kept off; about who speaks, but also who does not; about whose voices count, as well as whose voices go unheard. As such, power is about what we see easily and experience directly, as well as what we do not see.* (Hunjan and Pettit 2011)

Each of Lukes' (2005) three dimensions of power are outlined below:

Dimension 1: Power exercised by one group over another when conflict exists between the interests of the two groups: The winning side might use the "rules of the game," threats, or the offer of rewards to win.

We often see this power dimension in the political arena when a political party wins an election. In the middle of a fight with Congressional Republicans over the threat of a government shutdown in 2013, then-President Barack Obama exercised this dimension when he emphasized the power he gained by winning his Presidential reelection: "You don't like a particular policy or a particular president? Then argue for your position. Go out there and win an election. Push to change it. But don't break it" (Cillizza 2013).

Dimension 2: Power used to decide which issues are placed on the agenda to be debated and discussed: This power is wielded when the group setting the agenda prioritizes its interests and/or excludes the interests of a group with less power. This happens intentionally, by denying one group the opportunity to have their grievances heard by the larger group, through censorship, or by manipulating the rules of the game to ensure that some voices are not heard. It also happens directly, but unintentionally, when a group focused on emphasizing their own interests unconsciously denies the interests of another group in order to do so.

This second dimension of power is common in the political arena. Some ways in which it is exercised in political settings (Jansson 2017) include the following:

- **Reward power**: Those with power promise incentives to others to support a political move. For example, as part of an attempt in 2017 to repeal and replace President Obama's Affordable Care Act, Senate Republicans added the "Kodiak Kickback" to one version of the repeal bill. This provision was specifically designed to provide benefits for Alaskans, in an effort to convince Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski to vote for this bill (Stein 2017). Ultimately, this effort was unsuccessful in securing her vote.
- **Substantive power**: Those with power propose a strategic compromise that pairs a change that is unpopular with one that is popular. This is done with to elicit support from people who would otherwise disagree with the unpopular change.
- **Procedural power**: Those with power use built-in institutional procedures to support or block a policy proposal. One common way this happens is when the Speaker of the House of Representatives bypasses the committee to which a bill might normally be assigned, and instead assigns the bill to a committee that is likely to kill it. Another example of a political actor with substantial procedural power is the parliamentarian of the US Senate. This individual has the authority to review all bills before the Senate and to determine which aspects of the bill need just a simple majority of votes to pass and which should be subject to a higher standard.
- **Process power**: Those with power use processes that exist within the political system to influence others. They may intentionally increase or decrease conflict, control how much time exists for deliberations, or limit the scope of discussion allowed. When politicians term the end of an opposing party's term as a "lame-duck session," they are using process power to frame this time period as one in which no substantive policy work should happen. In contrast, when a governor terms a bill "emergency legislation," she is using process power to prioritize this bill over all other bills under consideration.

Dimension 3: Power that shapes the preferences and perceptions of those without power through framing issues and shaping public beliefs. This results in those without power actively engaging or complying with situations that might actually be against their own interests.

Lukes' first and second dimensions may feel especially familiar and obvious. You may readily be able to come up with examples of each from your own observations. In contrast, this third dimension may be less apparent, with critical implications for the suppression of conflict. Mechanisms that exercise this third dimension of power include mass media, news media, or "cultural transmission" (Lukes 2005). These subtly create norms around fashion and body image, gender roles, age, or ideologies in ways that the public may not realize.

Lukes (2005) provides a striking description of this third dimension of power:

> *Identity-related or what we can call recognitional domination can take more complex forms still where the dominant group or nation, in control of the means of interpretation and communication, project their own experience and culture as the norm, rendering invisible the*

> *perspective of those they dominate, while simultaneously stereotyping them and marking them out as 'other.' In doing so, they employ a range of power mechanisms, as the black poet Aimé Césaire observed when he wrote, 'I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement.' These words are quoted by Frantz Fanon at the very beginning of his first book, Black Skin, White Masks. In this and other books, Fanon explored the psychological, social, and political dimensions of this form of domination and the intimate relations between language, personality, sexual relations, and political experience in the context of the struggle for independence and the post-colonial experience in Algeria and elsewhere in Africa. Yet it is important, finally, to note that the injection will only be partially effective: that the dominated will never fully internalize ways of interpreting the world that devalue and stereotype them but rather experience what the black American political thinker W.E.B. Du Bois called a kind of 'double consciousness,' namely: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.* (p. 120)

The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described in her TED talk (2009) the "single story," a story that shows "a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." Her example further illustrates this third dimension:

> *It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.*

The process by which this third dimension of power is created and sustained is outside the scope of this book, but we recommend Bobbie Harro's (1982) cycle of socialization as one avenue to understand how this third dimension of power operates.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Exploring Dimensions of Power

Choose a successful advocacy effort for a cause you believe in. This may be an effort you were a part of, or one that has captured your interest. Describe specific ways that each of these three dimensions of power were utilized by the advocates or in response to the advocates.

Oppression

Political social workers need to be aware of how power plays out through **oppression** and prejudice in both the political processes within which we work and the policies that result from those processes. Oppression can be defined as "the domination of a powerful group—politically, economically, socially, culturally—over subordinate groups" or "an institutionalized, unequal power relationship" that combines prejudice with power (Van Soest 2008, n.p.). Oppression exists when some groups are granted power and opportunities at the expense of others, frequently in a way that sets up the dominant group as "normal" or "right" and people outside of that group as "the other." Oppression is not just a matter of individual attitudes toward those who are different. Rather, it is institutionalized into the systems within which we live, including political systems. It is perpetuated particularly through the third dimension of power, as a society creates implicit norms and traditions. "All oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings," but their experiences are not identical (Young 1990).

Young (1990) defines five categories or "faces" of oppression:

1. **Exploitation**: Seriously unequal distribution of wealth, income, and other resources, based on structure and group identity
2. **Marginalization**: Deliberate exclusion of some people from opportunities such as work and other participation in social life
3. **Powerlessness**: Lack of opportunity to develop opportunities, lack of autonomy (particularly in the workplace), disrespectful treatment due to lack of status
4. **Cultural imperialism**: Establishing the dominant group's culture as the "norm" and other cultures as deviant or inferior; makes developing stereotypes easier
5. **Violence**: Unprovoked attacks designed to harm, humiliate, or destroy someone because of membership in a marginalized group, often tolerated by dominant systems

The existence and extent of oppression, as well as perceptions about which groups are oppressed, are a source of controversy in US society. Social workers in the USA—as well as globally—have been raised in systems that create and replicate oppression. As social workers, we abide by the National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics, which states "Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice." The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2015), which accredits all US social work programs, explicitly mentions oppression in describing two core educational competencies: Competency 2 (engaging diversity and difference in practice) and Competency 3 (advancing human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice). We recommend the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (in Resource section) for more information. Despite this significant attention to oppression and cultural competence within the profession, it would be

naïve to suggest that all social workers are comfortable with discussing or addressing oppression and privilege, or that there is consensus among social workers as to their meaning and solutions. We encourage you to spend some time understanding the structural roots and history of these issues, even if it is a challenging journey.

The skills described throughout this book can be used to disrupt oppression in a variety of ways—from ensuring that candidates are elected who will work toward more equitable and just policies to organizing communities around the disruption of inequitable and unjust systems. Political social workers, as is the case for individual social workers in every setting, must continuously assess the options available to them to fight for social justice within and outside of systems and determine what methods they can most effectively use to challenge oppression.

Privilege

In order for oppression to exist, some groups must have **privilege** while other groups lack privilege. This means that power and opportunity are distributed inequitably. Privilege is a process in which power is transferred from one person or group to another. However, it is not just power that is transferred. As Franks and Riedel (2008, para 1) state, privilege

> *… is the invisible advantage and resultant unearned benefits afforded to dominant groups of people because of a variety of sociodemographic traits. Privilege provides economic and social boosts to dominant groups while supporting the structural barriers to other groups imposed by prejudice.*

In the US context, privilege is often linked with the above characteristics listed in the NASW Code of Ethics. These significant areas of inequity in our society include race, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, disability status, class, age, nationality, and religion. Privilege may also emerge in less obvious ways; for example, living in urban areas may confer privileges unavailable to those in rural areas. For many of us, the areas in which we have privilege are invisible to us. We are more aware of the areas in which we lack privilege. It may be easier for the authors as white women to see the ways in which gender decreases our privilege than it is to see the ways in which race increases our privilege. This is because the privilege that comes with race is simply our lived experience. Without attention to our privilege, we might assume unconsciously that this is everyone's experience.

Oppression may be magnified by membership in multiple groups that lack status. Similarly, privilege may be magnified by membership in groups with high status. Scholars of **intersectionality** note that "both oppression and privilege occur at multiple levels and sites and are experienced relationally and dynamically between and among individuals, identities, and groups" (Hillock 2012, p. 39). Intersectionality is defined as the ways in which our various social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination, discrimination, and disadvantage apply to an individual or group. This perspective highlights ways in which the location of an individual at the

"intersection" of multiple identities (for example race and gender, immigration status and sexual orientation, or all of the above) makes their actual experience of a phenomenon different from those who are not at that same intersection (Crenshaw 1991).

The topic of privilege is a challenging one for social work. It did not warrant an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* until 1995. It is mentioned only once (in the discussion of Competency 2, engaging diversity and difference in practice) in the Council on Social Work Education (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. The concept does not appear in the National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics. In fact, the word "privilege" is used only to describe privileged, or private, communications. Yet, social workers often enter into our work with communities from a position of privilege. We may bring privilege in through one or more of our identities, such as race, gender, class, or sexual orientation. Certainly, most social workers have privilege through education at the B.S.W., M.S.W., or Ph.D./D.S.W. levels. We carry privilege with us through our paid employment with agencies that provide funding or oversight of significant community efforts. We may have privilege through positions as elected officials or political staffers, or through the authority to make decisions about what others are permitted to do. These areas of privilege may interact with constraints that exist or are perceived by the communities with which we work.

Section 3: Engaging Power and Empowerment as a Political Social Worker

Oppression and Privilege in Political Social Work Practice

While some individual social workers may fear threatening their employment or livelihood by acting in ways that downplay their own privilege or that help groups they work with to increase their power, this work is a crucial part of social work practice. It requires continued reflection and improvement. On a macro level, the social work literature offers models for challenging oppression embedded in existing power structures not just in political social work, but also in organizational change (Latting and Ramsey 2009; Blitz and Kohl 2012), group work (Berg and Simon 2013), community-based research (Chavez et al. 2008), and community organizing (Mizrahi and Morrison 1993). Despite these models' existence, research finds that social work students may graduate without sufficient knowledge to begin addressing issues of privilege and oppression (Shine 2011). The process of unpacking privilege and oppression—undoing lessons about the supremacy of some groups and the perceived shortcomings of others that we have been taught throughout our lives—is an ongoing, difficult process. We hope that some of the resources in this chapter and in this book can be helpful to you in doing so.

Political social workers often have to make hard decisions in practice that center around oppression and privilege. Some of these questions include the following: Do we work within mezzo and macro systems that consistently advantage some groups

while marginalizing others? Do we fight from the outside to change these mezzo and macro systems, even though that type of change can take a long time and can be a painful process? Every social worker who wishes to make change on the macro level has to consider whether to do so within or outside of existing power structures.

Such questions seem increasingly prevalent in the early twenty-first century, as we see an increasing public willingness to question long-standing societal institutions. An important perspective worth considering comes from the legendary and controversial organizer Saul Alinksy (1971):

> *As an organizer, I start from where the world is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it into what we think it should be. That means working in the system.* (p. xix)

As they work to challenge oppression, political social workers also face questions such as the following: If we are in a situation where we have power and privilege, do we use our own privilege as a tool to share power with others? And, how do we organize in ways that enable community members' voices to come through, even if they are not saying what is popular or "right" to those in power?

When engaging with communities that have been disadvantaged by current systems, political social workers also consider: Does one need to be a member of the community they seek to organize or support? The reality is that in order to create change as a political social worker, you will likely find yourself working in a variety of communities in which you may not be a member. For example, in an electoral campaign, political social workers frequently find themselves working outside of their own local geographic community. In an advocacy campaign, if there are not enough members of your own community or group to create change, you may need to join with other groups in order to make change happen. At the same time, many argue for the importance of community membership, because a community member is better equipped to understand the community's culture and brings "a personal understanding of the political oppression experienced in marginalized communities" (Hardina 2004, n.p.). This perspective suggests that social workers should be of the same racial or ethnic background or share other identity characteristics with those in the community they are organizing. Others argue that social workers who, in the spirit of Paulo Freire (2000), emphasize partnership, dialogue, and mutual learning can organize outside of their own community successfully. Conversely, organizing within one's own community risks problematic conflicts of interests, leading social workers to have difficulty remaining neutral in discussions of strategies and tactics (Hardina 2004).

Whether as an insider or outsider to the community for which you work, social workers need to possess the self-awareness to place themselves in relation to the community, to understand the oppression experienced by that community, and to be able to recognize the effects that their own identity may have on their work with the community. Social workers working within marginalized communities also must

recognize that such communities may not have favorable opinions of the social work profession because of historically negative interactions with social workers. If you find communities resistant to social workers, consider the history of social work within that community. (See, for example, Sheryl Grossman's profile in Chap. 13, and her discussion of how social workers have been viewed in some disability communities.) As social workers who bring our own identities and privileges into a situation, we must be careful of our potential positionality "as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture" (McIntosh 2007 as cited in Hillock 2012).

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Ana Rodriguez, MSW
Immigrant Justice Organizer with the Colorado People's Alliance (Fig. 4.1).

Fig. 4.1 Ana Rodriguez, MSW

Ana began her journey to political social work at a young age, when she felt politicized due to her undocumented legal status. As a political science undergraduate, she felt that she needed to find a path into working on the ground for people like her. She enrolled in the MSW program at the University of Houston to pursue a political social work degree and internship opportunities in the Texas Legislature. Ana says that working with Texas legislators felt like the right "next step in the trajectory that [she] really wanted to embark on."

Ana worked on a Notario Bill in the Texas Legislature to punish notary publics who claimed to be attorneys by deceiving the immigrant community into paying them for legal services that they are not licensed to perform. "This was legislation that seemed good, seemed necessary … there was political will to work on it, political will to have it pass." While the legislation passed, Ana realized that it was not a policy that the community was actively advocating for, making implementation challenging. Legislators could have spent that time working on "legislation that was more difficult to pass" that the community really prioritized. While Ana had amazing experiences working for a progressive legislator at the Texas Legislature who centered his work on people of color and immigrants, she found herself realizing the "limits of working within the existing political system."

(continued)

Ana felt that if she "truly wanted to live the values of a social worker and implement the changes that were needed in the community … working within the [established] political system wasn't enough." She needed to work in an organization that holds politicians and those in power accountable. She now "build[s] campaigns for immigrant justice that are led by membership" of the Colorado People's Alliance. She works closely with community members to develop organizing strategies and push for changes in legislation. Because the organization is "member-led, members get to decide what strategies are the best, what strategies stay." The organization is guided by what "members of the community have capacity for." For example, staff proposed creating a traffic blockade to protest the lack of accessibility of Colorado's immigrant driver's license program, a program they felt unfairly excluded certain immigrants from obtaining a license. However, "because membership is largely immigrant and largely undocumented and given the political climate, they don't have the flexibility or ability to take those kinds of risks or engage in those kinds of actions." The organization listened to the voices and expressed needs of the community, and adjusted to political plans that did not endanger community members.

Empowerment

Just as understanding and using power is a crucial part of being a social worker, engaging in practices that build power among, or **empower**, marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed populations is also critical to the profession. The first sentence of our Code of Ethics underscores this, saying that "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers 2017). Empowerment refers to enhancing power on a personal, interpersonal, and/or political level (Gutiérrez 1990). It can be a process, an outcome, or a social work intervention, focused on "not coping or adaptation, but an increase in the actual power of the client or community so that action can be taken to change and prevent the problems clients are facing" (Gutierrez et al. 1995).

In political social work practice, we focus especially on **political empowerment**, that is, helping to reduce powerlessness and strengthening the political power individuals and groups hold. A focus on political empowerment is strongly grounded in conflict theory (Gutiérrez 1990), with its focus on altering levels of power held by different groups in society.

A psychological process of change is generally part of the empowerment process, involving an increased awareness of power that already "exists within any individual, family, group, or community" (Gutierrez et al. 1995). Through this process, social workers support individuals, groups, and communities in developing awareness of their own power. Katie Richards-Schuster's profile in Chap. 3 provides an illustration of this, as she discusses supporting children and youth to discover their own power to impact policy. Leonardsen (2007) suggests that social workers

should focus both on individual empowerment and empowerment in relation to others; otherwise, he argues, they risk becoming moralizing agents rather than facilitators of empowerment.

Social work practice focused on political empowerment emphasizes promoting meaningful participation among vulnerable populations (Richards-Schuster et al. in press). It is important to differentiate **participation** from **meaningful participation**. Many programs and structures provide opportunities for public participation. Rarely, though, do these opportunities enable the public to meaningfully impact decisions—decisions that often directly impact their lives and well-being. An important guide to thinking about this distinction between participation and meaningful participation is the seminal *Ladder of Participation* developed by Arnstein (1969). This ladder illustrated and "modeled ways in which citizens were being engaged in community-based policy programs in the 1960s and 1970s" (Richards-Schuster et al. in press).

The rungs of Arnstein's *Ladder* are listed in this section. As you read this, visualize a ladder with eight rungs. The lowest level of participation is listed at rung 1, at the bottom of the figure. The highest level of participation is listed at rung 8, at the top of the figure. As you go up the ladder's rungs, from 1 to 8, participation by vulnerable individuals and communities becomes increasingly meaningful. As participation expands and becomes more meaningful along the rungs of this ladder, we also see increasing amounts of people power. As Arnstein (1969) notes:

> *Citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic process, to be deliberately included in the future.* (p. 216)

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation (from the highest rung to the lowest)
Citizen power
8. Individuals or groups hold decision-making power through **citizen control** of specific programs, institutions, or communities.
7. Power-holders **delegate** or assign decision-making regarding specific issues, boards, or neighborhoods to individuals or groups in the community.
6. Individuals and power-holders **partner** to share in planning and decision-making, sometimes referred to as "power-sharing."
Tokenism
5. Individuals are **placated**, as power-holders hand-pick representatives to serve on decision-making bodies (e.g., boards, commissions, advisory groups), but in such a way that these representatives can easily be outnumbered.
4. Individuals are **consulted** for their input and perspectives; however, there is no mechanism to take these perspectives into account.
3. Participation focuses on a **one-way information flow**, where information is given to individuals, with no real opportunity for feedback.
Non-participation
2. Individuals are engaged in what Arnstein (1969) sees as group therapy—masked as participation, people are incorporated into participation specifically with the goal of changing their individual attitudes or behavior.
1. Individuals are **manipulated** by power-holders; they are merely involved as rubber stamps, rather than educating them to make informed decisions.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Applying the Ladder of Participation
Reflecting on your own life experiences, identify a situation for each of the following:

1. Where your input was, in actuality, non-participation
2. Where your participation was tokenistic
3. Where you experienced real voice and decision-making influence

In political social work, empowering vulnerable—and commonly oppressed—populations in meaningful ways can be particularly challenging. How do social workers convince those who have power because of the existing system to change that system in a way that might reduce their power? Choosing to relinquish some element of power in order to *partner*, *delegate*, or *enable citizen control* over decision-making requires a major shift. Such a shift can be very difficult for many people in power. In our own efforts, how do we ensure that engagement is truly participation—that it is not tokenistic, and that it is meaningful—reflecting true empowerment? Furthermore, how do we engage communities or populations who have been denied power by larger systems in social change efforts, when these efforts have proven unsuccessful or even damaging to them in the past?

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Empowerment Assessment and Planning
Thinking about your current or most recent field placement or place of employment, identify one method the agency uses to solicit feedback from clients or community members. Describe this process and where it falls on Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. How much power do clients or community members have relative to the agency's participation processes? Identify a plan to move participation up at least one rung. What might that participation look like?

For Further Reflection
What are some specific steps you could take to move participation to a higher rung? Who would be allies in that effort? Who would be opposed? What barriers do you see in seeking to do this in this setting?

Engaging with Your Own Power as a Political Social Worker

Hasenfeld (1987) argues that the social work profession makes a critical mistake in not giving enough attention to the concept of power. Power can take many forms in social work practice, requiring thoughtful attention to engaging with power in a meaningful—and influential—way. The kinds of political change we discuss in this book typically involve altering the dynamics of power at a community or societal level. Bobo et al. (2010) argue that the three main ways to alter the dynamics of power, or **power relations**, are:

- To build strong, lasting organizations
- To change the laws and regulations that affect power
- To change the people who are elected to office so that elected offices are held by those who believe in shared values and causes

They suggest that changing power relations involves a long-term investment in system-level changes.

Often, however, social workers express discomfort with power. Furthermore, compared to men, women express less interest and less comfort engaging with power (Hays 2013). While power can be exercised individually or collectively, in general, many social workers feel most comfortable engaging with collective power exercised by a group, community, or population to achieve shared goals. We also might be more comfortable with power that is considered positive or beneficent—used to serve the interest of others.

While feeling uncomfortable with power or with using power is understandable, it does not reflect the reality of social work practice. As a social worker at any level and in any field, an important part of your ability to do your job is being able to assess who holds power in a given situation, and choosing whether or not to use the power that you bring into that situation. Power is part of every professional interaction you have as a social worker. It is particularly so in the case of political social work. For example, among social workers who have run for office, both men and women express overwhelmingly consistent and positive perceptions about using power in their political position (Lane and Humphreys 2015). If the idea of wielding power makes you uncomfortable, consider how you can hold yourself accountable for your use of power. Ask others to hold you accountable as well, and continually reflect on opportunities to transfer your power to those who do not have access to power.

FURTHER REFLECTION and SELF-ASSESSMENT: Power Self-Reflection

This exercise (based on ideas in Hunjan and Pettit 2011) involves three steps.

1) Make a list of 5–10 categories of social identity that you think are most relevant in your geographic community or another community to which you feel connected. You may wish to include some from the list in the NASW Code of Ethics: *race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.*

2) For each of these categories of social identity, write down your own identity. For example, if you chose national origin, you might put born in the U.S., immigrant, member of sovereign tribe, etc.

3) Think of the majority of people who hold formal or informal power in your community. Does their identity match yours in these areas? Put a + next to the categories where you have the same identity as those in power, and a – next to those where you do not.

When you have finished, reflect on what this exercise reveals about the ways in which you might have access to power and the ways in which you might be blocked from access to power in your community.

To build comfort with power and to become effective empowerment agents, Leonardsen (2007) argues that social workers need opportunities and structures to practice their own empowerment during their social work education. Leonardsen distinguishes between indoctrination and a politicization of empowerment. In indoctrination, students are taught to view and adapt to situations through the same lens as their educators. Through politicization of empowerment, students themselves are empowered through their education to engage in processes of dialogue and reflection as they develop their own competence in approaching systemic challenges. By becoming empowered through their own education, Leonardsen (2007) argues that social workers will be better prepared to support their clients in building their own competence and confidence to engage in action.

Working in the political realm is a way for individual social workers to access their own power, and to help share that sense of power with others. If you see power as something oppressive and impenetrable, you may be wary of learning about it and using it. But we encourage you to, instead, think of yourself as a firefighter with a fire hose. You may be afraid of the power of that fire hose, but at some point the valve is going to open up and send highly pressurized water through it. If you are not prepared for the force of the water coming through the hose, you may end up drowning someone rather than putting out the fire. Power is like any other tool that you can harness as part of the social work process. Used poorly or with ill intent, it can increase injustice, harm lives, and cause more harm than good. Ignored, it can lead to the failure of the best intended social change processes. Used well, it can create opportunities for structural change and build the capacity of communities.

Engaging in Collective Power

As we engage in political social work practice, we may frequently (but not always!) find ourselves being outspent by those on the other side of the issue from us. In these situations, it is important to consider ways groups with limited resources harness collective power to counter those with significant resources. We often access power in six general areas (adapted from Samuel, as described in VeneKlasen and Miller 2007).

1. *The power of the people*: Social workers create social change gain power from large groups of citizens coming together to rally, contact elected officials, or vote. Even if those who participate have a small amount of power as individuals, collective action creates the opportunity for their power to be accessed and used.
2. *The power of knowledge*: Social workers harness knowledge of the electoral process, policy-making process, information about key issues to be discussed, and understanding of how policies affect disadvantaged individuals and communities to bring these sources of power to the change process.
3. *The power of constitutional guarantees*: Social workers in the USA have power through the right to free speech and other protections of the Bill of Rights that are not accessible to many change agents throughout the world.

4. *The power of networks*: Social workers are part of networks of professionals, clients, advocates, and other change agents, which offer critical knowledge, resources, and abilities.
5. *The power of solidarity*: Social workers harness power from engaging in change activities with groups of like-minded allies. **Solidarity** refers to the "union or fellowship arising from common responsibilities and interests, as between members of a group or between classes, peoples, etc.; community of feelings, purposes, etc.; communities of responsibilities and interests" (Solidarity 2016).
6. *The power of passion for a cause*: Social workers gain power through working on behalf of causes that they believe in, rather than ones that benefit the individual advocate. Social workers who advocate or lobby for underdog, underfunded groups without voice in political processes might refer to themselves as **white-hat lobbyists** (not a reference to *Scandal!*) (Vance 2008).

While challenging the power of opponents with substantial financial resources might sound challenging, social workers and allied groups frequently find success using these areas of collective power, particularly the passion and interest of committed people.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Accessing Power

Earlier in this chapter, you selected an example of a successful advocacy effort for a cause you believe in. Describe and discuss with friends or classmates whether, and how, each of the above areas of collective power came into play in the advocacy effort. Do you think that the advocacy effort would have benefited from more attention to one or more of these areas of power?

CASE STUDY: Immigrant Rights Advocacy

The following case study is based on the reflections of social worker Berenice Hernandez Becerra, an active participant in immigrant rights advocacy. Many of the experiences described here came from her undergraduate days at Texas A&M University, where she was an officer of the Minority Council for Student Affairs, an affiliate organization of United We Dream. United We Dream is a national organization completely led by immigrant youth and is the largest of its kind in the nation (United We Dream n.d.).

As of 2012, an estimated 1.8 million people in the USA were unauthorized youth who came to the country as children (American Immigration Council 2012). To address the issues faced by this population, the Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act (DREAM) Act was introduced in Congress in 2001, and continued to be reintroduced throughout the subsequent decade. The proposed DREAM Act included a pathway to citizenship for those who

(continued)

had immigrated to the USA as children (often referred to as "DREAMers"), and provided a way for eligible individuals to attain permanent legal status. The DREAM Act ultimately passed the US House of Representatives in 2010, but did not pass the Senate.

Throughout this time, DREAMers consistently engaged in political actions to push for policy change utilizing strategies that best fit their collaborative approach. In 2011, after the DREAM Act had failed in Congress, and there was no immediate prospect for its passage, the organization shifted its strategy to emphasize the immigrant youth community who were DREAMers sharing their stories. The motivation behind sharing their stories was to educate and bring awareness to the greater public about who the DREAMers were. As there was no national policy offering protections to this population at the time, collaborating and bringing understanding to the community were especially vital. Through their stories, DREAMers presented themselves to the public as educated individuals who had no choice in coming to the USA, since they came as children, and as individuals who give back to their communities.

Painting this image for the public contributed to new outside community collaborations—and ultimately to the implementation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2016). In place of the DREAM Act, President Barack Obama implemented DACA to create an avenue for approved applicants to temporarily avoid deportation and attain a permit to work in the USA (Svajlenka and Singer 2013). However, unlike the DREAM Act, DACA did not include a pathway to citizenship and therefore offered no opportunities for applicants to gain permanent legal status. In August 2012, DACA began accepting applications for undocumented individuals who came to the USA as children (Svajlenka and Singer 2013). Approximately 800,000 people were affected by DACA as of 2017 (Shear and Yee 2017).

While emphasizing positive images of DREAMers contributed to the development of DACA, Berenice, a DACA recipient, explains that it ultimately left behind many parents and family members that did not fit this specific image, and was perceived as blaming the parents who made the choice to come to the USA. To combat this skewed perception, a new focus on sharing the stories of youth and parents alike began. A diverse population of immigrants who were undocumented strategized together as to how to best share their stories in a manner that helped cultivate empathy and understanding among those that could have a say in politics through their vote.

One particular event that illustrated this shift was a 2013 event focused on gaining more support for the DREAM Act at Texas A & M University. Berenice and other members of the Minority Council for Student Affairs held a rally to bring awareness to Comprehensive Immigration Reform. The group deliberately sought to engage the surrounding community and to educate

(continued)

them about who immigrants were: that they were neighbors, friends, and individuals who were not merely "other," but who shared the human experience, with hopes, dreams, and struggles. Mothers and families who were undocumented shared their stories for the first time, and in doing so empowered the immigrant community to stand in solidarity. Simultaneously, this event involved the outside community by providing an honest glimpse into the realities of undocumented people living in the USA.

Berenice expresses the significance of sharing these stories: "In being quiet, it wasn't letting yourself be free… In trying to protect myself, I was doing the opposite." In this way, sharing their stories created a ripple effect of boldness among the undocumented population and allowed for a greater political movement to push forward. Because these activists understood that progress could not be made as efficiently if the community was not involved, the outside community was seen as a needed ally in creating effective and sustainable political change. Through raising awareness, educating, networking, collaborative efforts, community engagement, and creating alliances with members of the community that held political clout, the voice of a population often ignored in political discourse was able to be amplified.

FURTHER REFLECTION: Power and Empowerment in Immigrant Rights Advocacy
Respond to the following questions:

1. What concepts of power from this chapter do you see reflected in this case study?
2. The activists in this case study found themselves caught between (1) achieving policy change while silencing some voices in their community and (2) amplifying these voices, risking a longer path to further policy change. How would you approach this tension? Why? Does the Code of Ethics provide you any guidance?
3. In this case study, Berenice Hernandez Becerra says, "In being quiet, it wasn't letting yourself be free … In trying to protect myself, I was doing the opposite." What does this quote mean to you?

Section 4: Assessing Power Dynamics in the Political Context

Assessment in social work practice (Badger 2014) is both an outcome (I completed a biopsychosocial *assessment* of a client) and a process (I *assessed* the community resources for those in poverty). Assessment is key to social work practice regardless of the social worker's role, practice setting, client population, or level of practice. Assessment can be used (a) at the beginning of engagement to understand

presenting problems and the context for the work, (b) during the process of work to evaluate progress and outcomes and determine whether the actions being used are effective or to adapt to changing circumstances, and (c) at the termination of work to assess whether the work was successful and what follow-up plans should be made.

In political social work, assessment skills are critical for assessing both the political context within which we are trying to influence change *and* for assessing power dynamics among individuals and communities. Political social workers regularly engage in assessment to determine who holds power over their policy goal(s) and how best to influence and reach them. In this section, we provide an overview of three methods commonly used to assess power dynamics in political settings: power analysis, power mapping, and decision-maker analysis.

Power Analysis

Power analysis is a method to assess the many power dynamics that exist within the broad context in which we plan our change effort. A power analysis requires gathering information on key players and structures involved in policy change. A variety of approaches to power analysis exist.

One rigorous approach to power analysis, implemented over the course of several months, is a tool developed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). This tool assesses both formal and informal power relations and the power embedded in various macro-level structures. The SIDA power analysis can be used to assess political contexts—often within an entire country—to create meaningful strategies for change, and to help us better understand why previous change efforts worked or failed. According to the World Bank (2007), the goal is to discover "how power is distributed geographically, institutionally, and socially. It might also point to what kind of power is exercised and how, as well as how this power is perceived, and by whom" (p. 116). This power analysis approach begins with an in-depth review of existing documents and interviews with key informants. The data collected through this review are then used to create a narrative describing the power players, structures, and relationships. This tool may take up to 6 months due to its qualitative methods, grounded in the experiences of those who live in a political environment and know it well. If you have the time to take a careful, rigorous approach to power analysis, SIDA provides an excellent tool and process.

Another tool for analyzing power dynamics has been developed by Donna Hardina (2002) for guiding community organizers. This tool can be implemented in a shorter period of time. Below, we present a slightly modified version of the questions Hardina (2002) poses to guide you in conducting a power analysis surrounding your political change effort:

- Identify the policy or political change that you are seeking.
- Identify the decision-makers and interest groups likely to influence whether this change will happen.
- For each decision-maker and interest group you identify, assess the person's or group's:
  - Likely position on your proposed change
  - Source of decision-making power
  - Vested interests or motivations
- Identify potential contextual influences (e.g., social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, or media).
- Identify any alliances or coalitions among the decision-makers and interest groups.
- Describe the strategies that the decision-makers and interest groups are likely to use in support or opposition of your proposed change.

Power Mapping

Power mapping applies concepts of power to assess the power individuals and organizations hold around a desired policy change. Policy mapping helps us assess whether our desired policy change is viable given where the power centers are. It also helps us determine on whom we need to focus our efforts to strengthen the possibility of achieving this policy change.

One example of a power mapping tool is the Power Map created by Advocates for Youth, which political social workers can use to assess the power, support, and opposition for a desired policy change among key individuals and organizations (Reticker-Flynn 2013). Figure 4.2 presents a sample of a Power Map completed by Reticker-Flynn (2013). This Power Map tool can help you think about which individuals or organizations hold the most sway regarding your proposed policy change. It can inform an advocacy campaign, or it can be used to map out key players relative to an electoral campaign. You also can use this tool to identify allies who might be good partners in either type of campaign.

Figure 4.3 presents a blank Power Map that you can fill in with power players in your own campaigns, advocacy efforts, or organizational change work. On this map, plot each key individual and organization in your political context relevant to your desired policy change. Plot each individual and organization along the horizontal x-axis based on their level of support for your proposed solution (from "die hard ally" to "die hard opponent"). Plot each individual and organization along the vertical y-axis based on your assessment of their decision-making power relative to your desired policy change.

Once your map is complete, use it to help you to figure out where to focus your campaign's efforts. As Reticker-Flynn (2013) notes, "on the power map you want to shift people towards agreeing to your demands (left) and build your power (top)" (p. 12).

Electoral campaigns can use a variation on the Power Map to assess potential voters. Rather than measuring power, the vertical y-axis can instead be used to assess likelihood of voting in the upcoming election, and the x-axis to assess the level of support for your candidate. To measure likelihood of voting (the y-axis),

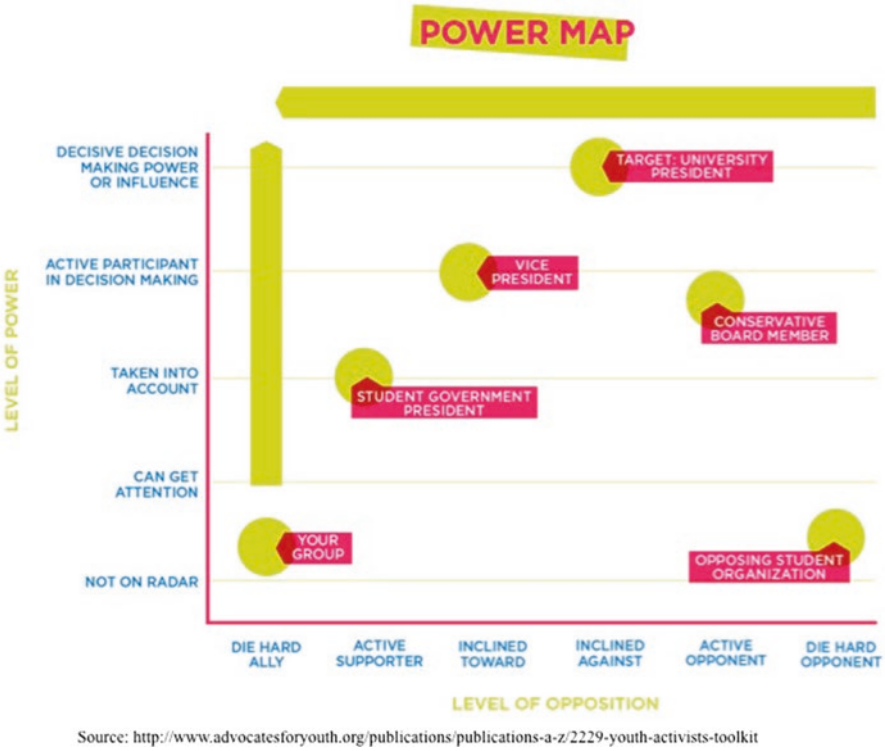

Fig. 4.2 Completed power map (Reticker-Flynn 2013)

campaigns rank voters from very likely to vote (those who have voted in two out of the last three elections, or those who have voted in similar elections) to very unlikely to vote (those who are not registered to vote or who have not voted in long periods of time). To measure the level of support (the x-axis), campaigns identify or "ID" voters, asking them directly to support the candidate. They then rate the person based on their response, from someone who is a strong supporter to someone who strongly supports the opponent. The most commonly used scale has five points:

1 = Strongly support your candidate
2 = Leaning toward your candidate
3 = Undecided ("there's an election?")
4 = Leaning toward your opponent
5 = Strongly support your opponent

Decision-Maker Analysis

Another method to analyze power held by specific individuals involved in policy decision-making is **decision-maker analysis**—that is, evaluating where specific

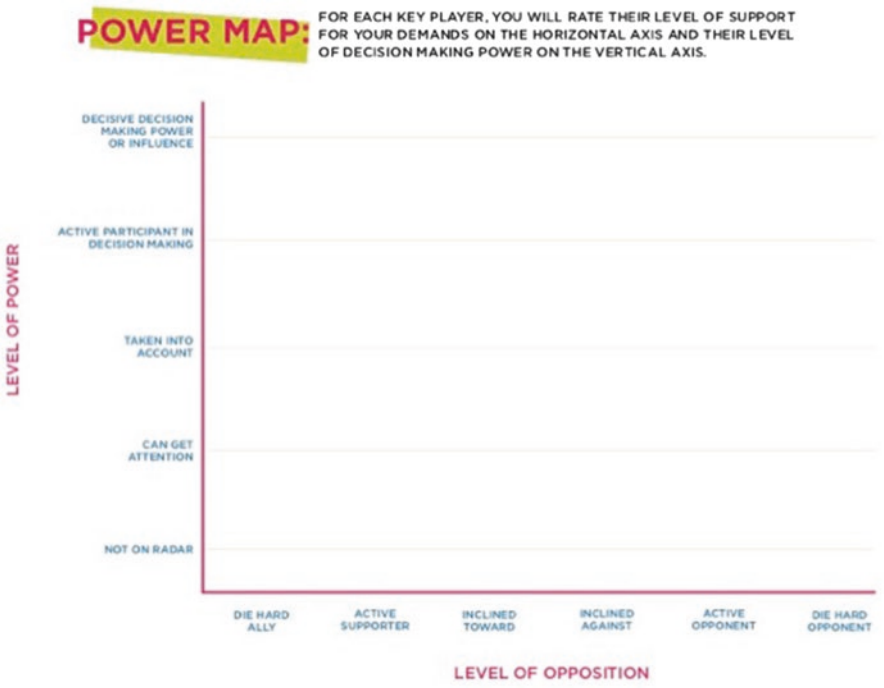

Fig. 4.3 Uncompleted power map (Reticker-Flynn 2013)

decision-makers stand regarding a desired policy change or other action. This method guides us in collecting and organizing information about individual decision-makers. We can use it to assess whether and how we might be able to influence them to act in the desired way.

One example of a decision-maker analysis is the Decision Maker Matrix developed by the Center for Tobacco Policy & Organizing and American Lung Association in California (n.d.). A modified version of the Decision Maker Matrix is presented in Fig. 4.4. This matrix requires identifying each individual person who has the power to make a decision regarding our desired policy change.

First, list each individual's name on a separate row under the first column. Then, under the second column, indicate whether each individual supports, opposes, or is undecided about the proposed policy change. Under the fourth and fifth columns, list all the information that you can collect about each decision-maker that may be relevant to understanding either where the decision-maker stands on the proposed policy change or factors that might help convince the individual decision-maker to support the change. Under the final column, focus on any relevant allies of the decision-maker. This information can help to think about ways that their relationships might offer an opportunity for us to try to influence the decision-maker.

Decision Maker Matrix
(adapted from The Center for Tobacco Policy & Organizing)

Decision maker *List each individual who has the power to make a decision about your proposed policy change*	Supports your policy change? *Yes/ no/ undecided*	Relevant vote record; term end date	Any prior relationship with you or your organization	Other information relevant to their stance on your proposed policy change *Family, profession, ideology*	Relevant allies of the decision maker *Individuals and groups with whom the decision maker is affiliated*

Fig. 4.4 Adapted decision-maker matrix (modified from the Center for Tobacco Policy & Organizing and American Lung Association in California n.d.)

While this matrix was initially designed for advocacy campaigns, it can be a useful tool for electoral campaigns as well. For example, you can use it to help you assess potential endorsements from influential community members, interest groups, donors, or other key figures.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Assessing Power Dynamics
Based on the same successful advocacy effort you have previously identified in this chapter, conduct an analysis of the power dynamics that were involved in the effort. Use any one of the three methods of assessing power dynamics described above. What does this process tell you about the situation that you did not know before the analysis?

Section 5: Managing and Resolving Conflict in Political Social Work

Discussions of power, using power, and attempts to shift the balance of power are all likely to result in some degree of conflict. In fact, Christopher Moore (2014) argues that **conflict** is a part of all relationships, whether between individuals, communities, organizations, nations, or between people and their government. Therefore, he argues, conflict should be viewed as a fact of life rather than something bad, dysfunctional, or abnormal. Conflicts can include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects, and can have roots in a variety of issues, from survival to identities (Mayer 2008).

In the political arena, issues of power, resources, and status typically trigger conflicts. While conflict that is acknowledged and dealt with can be productive and lead to growth, unmanaged conflict has the potential to be damaging and destructive. This suggests that political social workers should develop competencies in managing and resolving conflict.

Moore (2014) divides conflicts between those that are genuine: "real, tangible, and objective differences between parties" (p. 114), and those that are unnecessary: those that occur because of a subjective view that there is a dispute, but lack objective causes. He suggests that assessing conflict is a necessary step before managing and resolving it. This assessment needs to include review of the major issues, needs, and interests of the parties involved. Moore (2014) also advises assessing:

> *… the identities of the people or parties involved; their histories, relationships, and interactions; their emotions; their communications; the information available or not available to them that is relevant for resolving differences; the available procedures used by the parties to try to resolve the dispute; the parties' possession and use of power and influence to influence outcomes; a range of structural factors that create limits or parameters in which a dispute may or can be resolved; and beliefs, values, and attitudes.* (p. 116)

Although conflict appears in all areas of social work, we often are not aware of our innate reactions to conflict, nor our own abilities to manage conflict. The

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) is one tool to classify how individuals handle interpersonal conflict (CPP: The Meyers Briggs Company n.d.). This tool identifies five distinct categories of conflict management, depending on whether the individual tries to satisfy his or her own concerns (which the authors call *assertiveness*) or those of others (which the authors call *cooperativeness*).

These five categories of handling interpersonal conflict are competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding (CPP: The Meyers Briggs Company n.d.). Someone who responds to conflict by **competing** will be determined to win the conflict, regardless of the consequences for others; self-interest takes over. A **collaborator**'s response might be to ensure that everyone gets what they want, even at the expense of a decision being made. The response of a **compromiser** is somewhere in the middle of these five categories. Someone who is **accommodating** allows others to get what they want, even if it doesn't meet his or her own needs. Someone who is **avoiding** conflict does not deal with it at all.

Some conflicts do not require resolution. Avoidance or simple problem-solving may be the appropriate response. In other cases, if those involved in the conflict cannot resolve it through one of these approaches, it may ultimately be resolved through an outside party's authority and/or nonviolent action. In some cases, a negotiation process can be used to solve conflicts. In other cases, conflicts between groups that involve significant injustice may require resolution on a legal or legislative level.

To be clear, however, mechanisms for managing and resolving conflict will be affected by the autonomy and power of those involved. Where possible, political social workers should strive to approach conflict with clear communication and should resist the urge to use coercive tactics (Mayer 2008).

SELF-ASSESSMENT: Assessing Your Conflict Response

Think about the most recent time you experienced conflict in a professional setting and reflect on the following questions:

1. What was the situation? Who were the parties involved? Describe the interaction as you might in a process recording or other reflection on a practice interaction.
2. Was this response typical of how you respond to conflict? Why or why not?
3. Based on this reflection, which of the five categories discussed above (competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding) do you think accurately reflects your conflict response strategy?
4. How might your approach to conflict play into your practice as a political social worker?

Review of Key Terms and Concepts

Accommodation: a response to interpersonal conflict which allows others to get what they want, even if it doesn't meet the wants or needs of the conceding party.

Assessment: both an outcome and a process in social work practice that can be used in the beginning, middle, and termination phases of work.

Avoidance: a response to interpersonal conflict in which the conflict is not addressed.

Citizen control: individuals or groups who hold decision-making power in specific programs, institutions, or communities.

Collaboration: a response to interpersonal conflict which seeks to ensure that all parties involved receive what they are requesting, even at the expense of a decision being made.

Competition: a response to interpersonal conflict in which an individual is determined to win the conflict, regardless of the consequences for others.

Compromise: a response to interpersonal conflict in which the parties involved make concessions in order to reach an agreement.

Conflict: a typical part of all relationships. Includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects, and is frequently triggered by issues of power, resources, and status in the political arena.

Consultation: a type of participation in which individuals are asked to provide their input and perspectives.

Decision-maker analysis: evaluating where specific decision-makers stand regarding a desired policy change or other action. This method guides the collection and organization of information about individual decision-makers and can be used to assess whether and how to influence them to act in the desired way.

Delegate: assign decision-making regarding specific issues, boards, or neighborhoods to individuals or groups in the community.

Empowerment: a process, an outcome, or a social work intervention, focused on increasing the actual power of the client or community so that action can be taken to create social change.

Intersectionality: the ways in which our various social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination, discrimination, or disadvantage apply to an individual or a group.

Manipulation: a process in which individuals are influenced by power holders rather than educated to make informed decisions.

Meaningful participation: the utilization of an opportunity for the public to significantly impact decisions that often directly impact their lives and well-being.

One-way information flow: a process by which information is given to individuals without providing opportunity for feedback.

Oppression: the domination of a powerful group over subordinate groups in multiple domains, including politics, economy, social structure, and culture.

Participation: the opportunity for public involvement in decision-making, which may or may not be meaningful.

Partnering: a process in which individuals and power holders share in planning and decision-making, sometimes referred to as "power-sharing."

Placation: a process in which power holders hand-pick representatives to serve on decision-making bodies (e.g., boards, commissions, advisory groups), but in such a way that the representatives can easily be outnumbered.

Political empowerment: helping to reduce powerlessness and strengthening the political power held by individuals and groups.

Power analysis: a method that aids in the assessment of the many power dynamics that may exist within the broad context in which a change effort is planned. It involves gathering information on key players and structures involved in policy change.

Power mapping: a method that enables the application of concepts of power in order to assess the power that individuals and organizations hold around a desired policy change, determine whether the desired policy change is viable, and establish appropriate targets.

Power relations: the ways in which groups interact with, control, and are controlled by other groups.

Power "over": the ability of the powerful to affect the actions and thoughts of the powerless.

Power "to": the capacity to act; capability.

Power "with": collective action, social mobilization, and alliance building.

Power "within": a sense of dignity and self-worth at the individual or collective level.

Privilege: the invisible advantage and resultant unearned economic and social benefits afforded to dominant groups of people because of a variety of sociodemographic traits.

Procedural power: the exercise of power in which those with power use built-in institutional policies to support or block a policy proposal.

Process power: the exercise of power in which those with power use political activities to influence others.

Reward power: the exercise of power in which those with power promise incentives to others to support a political move.

Solidarity: common experience arising from common responsibilities and interests.

Substantive power: the exercise of power in which those with power propose a strategic compromise that pairs an unpopular change with a popular change, in order to elicit support from people who might otherwise disagree.

White-hat lobbyist: those who advocate or lobby for underdog, underfunded groups who often do not have a voice in political processes.

Resources

Book Chapter

The Five Faces of Oppression: http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/62970.pdf

Books

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In, by Roger Fisher, William L. Ury, Bruce Patton: http://www.hmhco.com/shop/books/Getting-to-Yes/9780395631249

Power—A Practical Guide for Facilitating Social Change, by Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit: http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/power-a-practical-guide-for-facilitating-social-change/

Power Analysis: *a Practical Guide*, by Jethro Pettit: http://www.sida.se/contentassets/83f0232c5404440082c9762ba3107d55/power-analysis-a-practical-guide_3704.pdf

Promoting Community Change: Making It Happen in the Real World, by Mark S. Homan: https://www.cengage.com/c/promoting-community-change-making-it-happen-in-the-real-world-6e-homan

The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation, Chap. 3: Power and empowerment, by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller: http://www.justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/new-weave-eng-ch3-power-empowerment.pdf

The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence, by Dacher Keltner: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/312367/the-power-paradox-by-dacher-keltner/9780143110293/

Podcast

NPR's The Perils of Power: http://www.npr.org/2016/09/06/492305430/the-perils-of-power

Every Little Thing episode on the Senate Parliamentarian: https://gimletmedia.com/episode/the-senate-whisperer/

TED Talk

Kimberle Crenshaw on the Urgency of Intersectionality: https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

Websites

Powercube: https://www.powercube.net/resources/ or go to https://www.powercube.net/ and on the bottom left of the page click "Resources".

Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice: https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWCulturalStandards.pdf

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