

## Foucault, Power and Participation

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### Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Foucault's work on power offers a distinctive and original perspective with the potential to afford insights into the nature of participation. I begin by providing a brief exegesis of Foucault's conceptualisation of power in his middle to late work. The notion of governmentality is drawn out as a potentially useful tool in understanding participation as a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon. I conclude by outlining some of the possible implications of Foucault's thinking about power for studying children's participation.

### Keywords

power; participation; Foucault; governmentality

### Introduction

This paper argues that Foucault's work on power offers a distinctive perspective with the potential to afford insights into the nature of children's participation. I start from the premise that all of the activities currently grouped together under the rubric of participation in decision-making involve power of some sort. As such, thinking about what power is and how it can be analysed is crucial for understanding children's participation (Prout and Tisdall, 2006).

I begin by explaining what Foucault's work might contribute to existing theorisations of children's participation. I then explore his conceptualisation of power, exploring in turn each of what I take to be its key features. In particular, I expand upon the notion of governmentality, developed in Foucault's later work, as a way of conceptualising the ambiguity of participation. Finally, I review what this conceptualisation of power can offer to empirical investigations of children's participation.

### A Distinctive Contribution?

It is not my intention here to provide a detailed overview of the existing literature in childhood studies on Foucault, on power, or on participation. Instead,

I want to make two general points about these literatures that will help to frame the arguments which follow.

First, Foucault is widely understood by childhood researchers to have theorised power as a form of social control (e.g. James *et al.*, 1998; Valentine, 2000; Collins and Kearns, 2001; Blackford, 2004). This reading of Foucault as an Orwellian prophet of entrapment through surveillance, though common, has been disputed for some time now. A number of Foucault scholars (e.g. Simons, 1995; Rose, 1999; Elden, 2001; Deleuze, 2006) and, indeed, Foucault himself (1997a) have argued that his conception of power is much more ambivalent (see also Allan, 1999; Moss and Petrie, 2002; MacNaughton, 2005; Moss, 2006). Ironically, from a Foucauldian perspective, the question of which reading is 'correct' is, to borrow his own remarks on Nietzsche, "of absolutely no interest" (1980a: 53–54). However, I will argue here – as elsewhere (Gallagher, 2006; Gallagher, 2008; Gallacher and Gallagher, forthcoming) – that the latter reading, of power as ambivalent, both dangerous and full of promise, both a means of control and a means of resistance, is particularly useful for understanding children's participation.

Second, most existing theorisations of children's participation attempt to provide generalised schema for categorising the phenomenon. The starting point for such theories is the recognition that 'participation' encompasses a wide range of activities, and as such is an unhelpfully broad term. The theories therefore subdivide participation into different types, based, for example, on the balance of decision-making power between children and adults (e.g. Hart, 1992; Treseder, 1997) or the extent of its impacts (e.g. Kirby with Bryson, 2002; Lansdown, 2004 and 2006). Other typologies approach the question of who has power by categorising participation according to the political processes involved, such as consultation, self-advocacy and representative versus participative democracy (e.g. Lansdown, 2001; Cockburn, 2005; Cairns, 2006).

Drawing from Foucault, it is possible to theorise power and participation quite differently. In what follows, I argue that Foucault's work offers not a general theory, but a set of tools for analysing different instances of participation in their unique specificity.

## **Foucault on Power**

In his middle to late work, Foucault repeatedly frames his project as an examination of the relations between knowledge, power and human subjects. However, most commentators agree that it is pointless to demand a coherent general theory of power from Foucault, since he explicitly refuses to offer one. Sceptical of grand theories, he states that "What is power?" is obviously a theoretical question that would provide an answer to everything, which is just what I don't want to do"

(2003: 13); and again, “when I examine relationships of power, I create no theory of power... The question of power in itself doesn't interest me.” (1996: 360-361).

In this context, it seems contradictory to argue that Foucault's work on power can contribute to the theorisation of children's participation. Yet much depends on how 'theorisation' is understood (McHoul and Grace, 1993). If we are looking for a general theory for children's participation, a universal scheme through which all instances of the phenomenon can be explained, then Foucault will be of no help whatsoever. However, if we are looking for tools that will enable us to get to grips with the myriad forms of children's participation in all of their diversity and specificity, then Foucault has much to offer. In contrast to the typologies of children's participation mentioned above, his contribution is more methodological than definitional (Foucault, 1978), and works towards a recognition of differences rather than identities (Deleuze, 2006).

Accordingly, the following section sets out a number of methodological principles, based on what I have found to be the most interesting elements of Foucault's approach to studying power.

### *Power is Actions over Actions*

In one of his later papers, Foucault offers a general definition of the kind of power in which he is interested, as “a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future... it incites, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely” (1983: 220). On this view, power is understood as something that is exercised, not possessed. Power is not a disposition or a capacity, nor is it a resource or a commodity (Foucault, 2003: 13). To take an example, one could say that, in a school with an elected pupil council, each pupil has the power to vote in the pupil council elections. Yet Foucault would stress that this power does not exist in the abstract, since it is the power *to do* something specific. This power only exists when the pupils perform the action of voting. If they do not vote, then voting for them is an unrealised capacity, or a potential, not a power.

This immediately conflicts with the common-sense usage of the term in English. Indeed, Morriss (2002) argues that this conflict is merely the result of lax translation, as the French language has two words, *pouvoir* and *puissance*, which are both commonly translated as power. He argues that the former, which Foucault uses, connotes action, whereas the latter, rarely used by Foucault, is closer to the English concept of power as a capacity. Morriss therefore concludes that Foucault has nothing to say about power, since he is in fact talking about *pouvoir*. My own conclusion is somewhat more generous. I would argue that Foucault's understanding of power as *pouvoir* means that his work will be of little use if we wish to define power as a capacity or disposition. There may be

good reasons for retaining such a definition of power (Lukes, 2005). However, I want to argue that Foucault's alternative perspective can provide important insights into children's participation.

### *Power is Diverse*

Foucault resists defining power in a metaphysical way, insisting that "something called Power...which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffuse form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action." (Foucault, 1983: 219) Throughout his historical analyses, the question "what is power?" is left open, with enquiry focussed instead on *how* power is exercised in particular contexts, and with what effects: "the issue is to determine what are, in their mechanisms, effects, their relations, the various power-apparatuses that operate at various levels of our society, in such very different domains and with so many different extensions" (Foucault, 2003: 13).

If there is a general lesson here, it is that no instance of children's participation will be quite the same as another. Foucault encourages us to think of powers rather than Power. The power that a teacher exercises over her pupils is not the same as the power that those pupils exercise to resist the teacher's demands. Both of these kinds of power are likely to differ from the power exercised by that teacher's manager. And a parent might exercise power in a way that is different again, while a school inspector would exercise power in another way altogether.

This helps to explain Foucault's somewhat counter-intuitive claim that "power as such does not exist". To say that someone is exercising power is in fact to say very little. Taking the example of a school council, to say that the teachers exercise power over the councillors is a little like saying that the room in which they meet is made up of atoms. Though they may be true, the generality of such claims renders them almost meaningless. What matters is *how* the teachers are exercising power, in what context, over which children and with what effects. Against any attempt at a total explanation, Foucault calls for dispersed, decentralised, localised analyses, diverging in difference rather than converging around their similarities.

In examining how power operates, Foucault found metaphors of conflict and warfare useful, particularly the notions of strategies and tactics (later elaborated on by De Certeau, 1988). I think that these notions are helpful for the analysis of participatory processes because they can be applied universally, to any instance of children's participation, but in a way that draws out the specificity of that particular instance. We might ask, of a participatory process, is it operating as part of a strategy that divides or incorporates, legitimises or de-legitimises decisions, homogenises views or increases their diversity? Does it build conflict or consensus, amplify protest or seek to amputate it? Is power being exercised through tactics of coaxing, persuasion, refusal, persistence or evasion?

### *Power is Dispersed*

Foucault refuses to accept that power can be concentrated in the hands of a particular set of people. As he infamously asserts, “Power is everywhere” (Foucault, 1978: 93). The net-like anatomy of power means that it is distributed throughout society rather than, as is often supposed, concentrated in some central body, such as the state.

Returning to the process of voting in school council elections, the power that pupils exercise as voters works through a whole network of relations: between the candidates and their peers, between friendship groups amongst the pupils, between the pupils and the teachers, between the teachers and the school management. If these relationships change or break down, the power which the pupils are able to exercise will also be transformed. Therefore the assertion that the pupils possess the power to vote is true only in the weakest sense. As part of an analysis of school council elections, this assertion risks diverting attention away from the relationships through which the voting process effects change:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation (Foucault, 1980b: 98).

This can be contrasted with existing theories which classify children's participation according to who has power: adults, children or both (Hart, 1992; Treseder, 1997; Lansdown, 2006). A Foucauldian conception of power suggests that it might be useful to look instead at the ways in which power is exercised through networks of relations (e.g. Tisdall and Davis, 2004). Thus the ways in which power is exercised by councillors in a pupil council could be placed in the context of how, in that particular school, other pupils exercise power over the councillors (and vice versa), how the senior management exercise power over the council (and vice versa), how the education authority exercises power over the senior management (and vice versa), and so on.

### *Start at the Smallest Scale*

Seeing power as circulating through networks has particular implications for the understanding of scale. Foucault stresses that power cannot be viewed as something which flows from the top of a social hierarchy downwards – from the state to the people, from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, and so on:

One must rather conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination (Foucault, 1980b: 99).

Understood in this way, power is not something which operates only occasionally, through the lofty decisions of governments or the financial transactions of large corporations. As 'actions upon actions', power also animates many more mundane, everyday practices. Indeed, beneath the monolithic appearance of corporate and governmental decision making, one finds that such decisions are 'powerful' only because they are implemented by vast networks of people (service managers, administrators, politicians, civil servants, teachers, social workers, classroom assistants, children, parents, community workers, and so on) through their everyday actions upon one another. This has implications for empirical studies of children's participation, to which I return at the end of this paper.

### *Investigate Effects, Not Intentions*

Foucault admits that power is intentional inasmuch as an exercise of power is always calculated to satisfy a series of aims and objectives. But "this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject" (Foucault, 1978: 95). In other words, subjects who exercise power do not have a monopoly on the effects of their actions. In some cases, the intentions and the effects of an action may bear little relation to one another, and may even be directly contradictory. For example, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how prisons, as an apparatus intended to reform criminals, thereby enabling them to participate in society, in fact do no such thing (Foucault, 1977). Their effect is rather to make delinquency manageable, to render those with criminal tendencies more predictable, and therefore less dangerous. Foucault does not think that this means that the expressed intentions of penal reformers were disingenuous. But he does think that these intentions shift attention away from the real social function of prisons. In other words, in the analysis of power, the conscious intentions of those involved are largely irrelevant, simply because the rationality of power is not to be found in the minds of those who exercise it but in its effects. Accordingly, Foucault suggests that those investigating power might

refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: 'Who then has power and what has he in mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?' Instead, it is a case of studying power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices. What is needed is a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application...where it installs itself and produces real effects (Foucault, 1980b: 97).

This indicates that researchers investigating children's participation could gain important insights by looking at the effects of participatory initiatives, rather than at the professed intentions of the people involved in designing and implementing those initiatives. It might be useful to make a distinction between discourse – what is *said* or written about participation – and practice – what is *done* under the

auspices of participation – how those involved in the project act, the techniques they use to influence one another, or to resist or evade such influence, and what effects all of these actions have. Yet the notion of evaluating outcomes raises problems of knowledge when approached from a Foucauldian perspective. I discuss these briefly towards the end of this paper.

### *Power as Government*

Foucault's later work begins to experiment with the concept of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1992) as a more nuanced way of understanding power than the notions of warfare that preoccupy him during the 1970s. Broadly speaking, he uses the term to connote power exercised in the management of groups of people, from families and school classes to church congregations and national populations. Foucault argues that, in liberal democracies, these processes rest upon the idea that effective government depends not upon crushing the agency of subjects into submission, but rather in cultivating this agency in particular ways. The kind of government in which Foucault is interested does not operate by crudely imposing the will of one party (the bourgeoisie, the state, the employer, the teacher) upon a subordinate party (the proletariat, the citizen, the employee, the pupil). Instead, there is a much more subtle interplay between the hierarchical, coercive power of the governor over the governed, and the governed subject's power over herself, which we might call her autonomy. As Burchell (1996) notes, "government in general is understood as a way of acting to affect the way in which individuals *conduct themselves*" (Burchell, 1996: 20, emphasis in original). This process involves "a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself" (Foucault, 1997b: 182).

This notion of governmental power thus contains an important ambiguity. On the one hand, the governors attempt to make the governed so effective at regulating their own conduct that external supervision can be reduced to a bare minimum (Foucault, 1977). Persuading people to participate in their own subjection in this way can be seen as a cunningly efficient ruse of domination. However, it can equally be argued that the ability to regulate and conduct oneself is in fact the very basis of autonomy and freedom. In other words, by developing a human being's ability to govern herself, governmental power inevitably equips her to become an independent actor, no longer so beholden to externally imposed regulations. There is no reason to suppose that the power of agency will be concordant with the power of subjection. As Simons (1995) points out, our "subjective capacities include those of resisting the power that has made us what we are" (1995: 4).

Transposed to children's participation, this analysis suggests some interesting lines of thought. From education, health care and social work to anxieties about juvenile crime, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and anti-social behaviour, children and young people are one of the most intensively governed groups in

modern societies (Prout, 2000; Hill et al, 2004; Tisdall and Bell, 2006). The rise of children's participation might be seen as emerging from the recognition that the effective government of children depends upon securing their complicity in the process. Equally, this can be seen as a tacit admission of the dependence of governmental organisations (the state, schools, the police, etc.) upon the agency of children. Only if the agents which make up these organisations are willing to comply with their aims can the organisations – as nothing more than the sum total of all the power relations between their subjects – achieve those aims. This theme threads through diverse neo-liberal technologies of childhood government, from behaviour contracts and restorative justice initiatives to pupil councils and citizenship education. Self-realisation and control, far from being opposed, are in fact intimately connected, albeit through relations of conflict and struggle (Prout, 2000).

Understood in this way, the power of governed agents and the power of governmental institutions appear as co-dependent rather than mutually exclusive. Participation can thus be seen as a frontier on which the wills of individuals and the wills of governmental institutions directly confront one another. The result is an ongoing battle, in which the wills of organisations and their subjects engage with and attempt to influence and re-align one another through endless 'actions upon actions'. As such, participation has the potential for both compliance and insubordination. As Rose (1999) notes, "This kind of 'government through freedom' multiplies the points at which a citizen has to play his or her part in the processes that govern him [sic]. And, in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest, challenge those demands placed upon them" (1999: xxiii) One of Freeman et al's (2003) young respondents exemplifies this situation in his description of a youth council with which he was involved:

It was tokenistic though, to a point. But we took it past that point when we started talking and not saying what they wanted to hear. And there's nothing wrong with tokenism for a beginning because it always develops into a big hard stick that's poking them in the eye (2003: 66).

### **A Foucauldian Understanding of Children's Participation**

By way of conclusion, I want to review the key points that I have drawn out of Foucault's work on power, looking briefly at the implications of each of these for understanding children's participation.

Above all, for Foucault power is not a commodity. Rather, it is a situation in which one 'entity' (a human being, an institution) acts towards another entity so as to influence the actions of that entity. This has several implications.

First, it may be helpful to think of power not as a 'thing' but as a general term for certain kinds of actions. Looked upon in this way, power will appear both diverse and dispersed, rather than concentrated in the hands of institutions or certain classes of people. Instead, power can be seen as distributed throughout

society, exercised via a multitude of small-scale, local practices. It may therefore be unhelpful to imagine children's participation as a process by which adults, who 'have' power, empower children by 'giving' them some of this power. It might be more interesting to look at precisely how power is exercised, through a whole range of different techniques, in the interactions between the individuals involved.

Second, power is relational. In other words, one cannot 'have' power as such. Rather, one exercises power *over* this or that entity. As such, power always involves a relationship between at least two entities. It will vary according to the nature of these relationships, the personal characteristics of the actors involved, the resources (social, cultural, material) available within these relationships, and so on. This provides further support for recent suggestions that empirical work might usefully take these relationships and their networks as a key focus (Tisdall and Davis, 2004; Prout and Tisdall, 2006).

Third, power can be viewed at different scales. Importantly, from a Foucauldian perspective these scales are 'nested'. Powers exercised at a large scale depend upon powers exercised at smaller scales; whilst powers exercised at smaller scales may be influenced or made possible by larger scale strategies of power. One can look at how large-scale structures, such as governments, colonise and make use of smaller scale power relations, such as those between individual children, between parents and children, between teachers and pupils, and so on. But equally, one can look at how these smaller scale power relations are nested within the larger scale. For example, how do pupils exercise power to comply with, resist, evade, colonise, appropriate or reproduce the power exercised over them by their teachers? And how do the teachers' exercises of power fit with the aims of the school as a whole? In the context of children's participation, questions of this sort seem to me to be crucial. The points of connection between these different scales might be seen as key sites for investigation.

A Foucauldian perspective on power also entails a particular understanding of intentionality. For Foucault, power manifests its purposes in its effects, not in the conscious intentions of those who exercise it. This appears to align with recent arguments that children's participation ought to be analysed according to its outcomes and impacts (e.g. Kirby, 2002; Lansdown, 2004 and 2006). However, a note of caution is needed here. Foucault's work on the relationships between power and knowledge in the human sciences (e.g. 1980b) invites a profound suspicion towards any attempt to devise methods for the standardised, 'objective' measurement of participation outcomes. Systematic calculation of this sort would be yet another form of the utilitarian instrumental rationality by which childhood is increasingly governed (Moss and Petrie, 2002); a kind of infernal government of government. In my view, a Foucauldian approach to studying the effects of participation would be less systematic, more interpretative, and hopefully both more exciting and more unsettling. It would involve telling unexpected, passionate stories (Game and Metcalfe, 1996) about participation, rather than making claims to objective truth.

Finally, I have outlined the notion of power as governmentality, and suggested that this might provide a useful way of getting to grips with an important ambiguity at the heart of participation. This analysis moves beyond oppositional models of power, looking instead at the ways in which government both requires the complicity of the governed, and is at the same time limited by the extent of this complicity. In particular, I think that this conception supplies a much-needed alternative to two prevailing narratives about participation. The first of these holds that participation is the key to true democracy, a way to transform unjust decision-making structures so that every child's voice can be heard and their wishes acted upon. This is a view of children's participation as an ideal to drive democratic renewal and the recognition of children's political rights as human beings (Cairns, 2006). The second narrative is much more dismal, suggesting that, in reality, participation is often ineffective, with adults consulting children but not acting upon their suggestions for change. This is tokenism, at the bottom of Hart's (1992) ladder – not 'real participation' at all.

I think that there is a growing sense that both of these narratives miss out something vital about the messy, fraught and ambiguous processes of children's participation. I want to suggest that the Foucauldian model of power and participation that I have outlined here might offer a viable alternative.

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