

On Kent McClelland's paper about social power

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET):

Date: Fri Dec 10, 1993 12:52 pm PST
Subject: On Kent McClelland's paper about social power

[From Bill Powers (931210.1145 MST)]

Kent McClelland:

Thanks for the copy of your wonderful article, "Perceptual control and social power." Getting this introduction to PCT into print is a great accomplishment, particularly because it is so clear and well-written. I think your analysis of social power opens the way to some real understanding of this phenomenon.

While reading your paper I was inspired to have a thought about a facet of social power that is not mentioned. Skinner's concept of a "contingency," while not analyzed correctly by Skinner, is still a useful concept and I think bears resurrection.

A contingency is a cause-effect relationship imposed by the environment. If you drive your car into a tree, the car will be damaged. That is, the condition of your car is contingent on where you drive it. Likewise, if you want to drive from Durango to Denver, you will not arrive at Denver unless you drive on the roads. So achieving the goal of driving to Denver is contingent on driving your car where the car is capable of going. And again, if you want to drive from First Avenue to 30th Avenue along Main Street in Durango, your success is contingent on driving at considerably less than 50 miles per hour; if you drive too fast, you will be arrested.

The first of these contingencies is in the class of natural law: nobody can drive a car (at speed) into a tree (of large size) without damaging the car. There's nothing personal in it; that's just how the world works.

The second contingency is man-made, because the roads were built by human agents. They were built along certain routes and not others; they provide access by car to certain places and not to others. By building roads where they are, the builder in effect said, "Here are the ways a person can go by car." Driving to a certain place is contingent on staying on the roads that already exist. Nobody can just build a road to go to any arbitrary place, so the choice of places to drive to is limited, as is the route. There was nothing personal in the choice of where to build the roads; that is, the builders were not thinking of the convenience of any particular person (normally).

The third contingency is also man-made, but it is not a physical thing: it is a social rule. It says that anyone who drives in that place above a certain speed will be arrested. Still nothing personal: the rule isn't aimed at you or President Clinton, but at anyone who exceeds the cutoff speed. Driving from A to B successfully is contingent upon following this rule. In this case, the contingency is not implemented by a physical arrangement of the environment, but by the actions of a person.

The special property of a contingency in relationship to behavior is that it does nothing but create links between actions and consequences. It does not say whether a person should seek or avoid those consequences, or that the person must do or not do the act that leads to them. It just says that if the act is performed, the consequence will follow. A Skinner box is set up so that for every n presses of a lever, a piece of food will fall into a dish. This box in no way says that anything or anyone has to press the lever, or that the appearance of the food in the dish is of consequence to anything or anyone. It just says, "If you do this, that will happen."

When an entrepreneur opens a bagel shop, a contingency is established: if you go into that shop and pay the asking price, you will be handed a bagel. Conversely, if you don't enter the shop or don't pay the price, you get no bagel. That's just how this little corner of the world operates. If you don't want a bagel, you don't have to go into the shop or pay any money. Even if you do want a bagel, you don't have to enter the shop. The shop is simply a cause-effect entity, which can be operated by anyone who is willing to do what is required. A person could enter the shop, pay the money, and throw the bagel away. Nothing forces the person to do anything, at any stage.

So contingencies are not force, coercion, or influence. They are simply properties of the world, some natural and some artificial. People can take advantage of them or not, as they please. In PCT terms, contingencies are part of the feedback function that converts actions into perceptual effects.

Contingencies in themselves never control behavior, but they do say that if a person wants something, only certain ways of getting it are available, and if the person wants to avoid certain experiences, then certain ways of getting things must be avoided (and the two other combinations as well). A contingency is always expressed in such if-then terms, like a natural law. Artificial contingencies add to those that naturally exist: if you want to fly, then you have to use a flying machine. Of course if you don't want to fly, you don't have to use a flying machine.

All social projects establish contingencies. The establishment of contingencies goes beyond the kind of social influence that comes simply from people aligning their goals. A contingency is not a control action taken with respect to any given person, in the way a bigoted white community can band together to make life miserable for a black person who moves in. The contingency simply lies there until someone has a goal that involves the contingency; then the if-then rule is triggered, and the person finds that only certain behaviors will work to attain the goal. If you want to drive a car legally, you have to have a driver's license; if you want a driver's license, you have to go to the place where they are issued and pass some tests. If you want to pass the tests, you have to write down the correct answers or drive a car in a way that satisfies an examiner.

Social contingencies obviously proliferate and form a network of subcontingencies, sometimes an almost impenetrable network. This network has no physical existence independent of people; it consists entirely of people who have chosen to act in certain ways, according to rules they have accepted. The policeman who issues a speeding ticket is not carrying out a personal relationship with the offender, but simply implementing a contingency that he or she has accepted as the way to do this job. That is why the offender is called "the offender" instead of Joe Smurf. The offender is whoever acted in a way that triggered the contingency.

Contingencies form an impersonal social system that transcends the alignment of individual goals and the exertion of direct influence by a group of persons on one individual. Contingencies are established by people with aligned goals, but they are not control actions in themselves. What they do is define properties of the social world without regulating behavior, just as physical laws establish properties of the physical world without specifying particular occurrences. The main difference between social and physical contingencies is that people can complain about social contingencies and act to change them. All that can be done about physical contingencies is to change your goals or look for loopholes.

So, do you think contingencies belong on the list of means of applying social power?

Best, Bill P.

Date: Sun Dec 12, 1993 2:56 pm PST
Subject: social contingencies

[From Kent McClelland (931212)] Bill Powers (931210.1145 MST)

- > Contingencies form an impersonal social system for loopholes.
- > So, do you think contingencies belong on the list of means of applying social power?

I certainly do!

Thank you for your compliments on my paper and even more for the compliment of taking its argument one logical step further. This idea of a social contingency pinpoints a phenomenon that sociologists have attempted to describe in various ways: as social structure, social arrangements, norms, mores, social systems, etc. Understanding the workings of this "almost impenetrable network" of "social contingencies and subcontingencies" (as you aptly put it) has been a prime goal of sociologists ever since the days of Max Weber, a century or so ago. Sociologists have always insisted on the importance and power of these social structures vis-a-vis the individual (and a cynic would say that by emphasizing the importance of the social they're trying to keep themselves in steady work!). Your point that "contingencies in themselves never control behavior" is a useful reply to some fuzzy sociological thinking on the subject.

Social contingencies come in at least two kinds--the dead hand of tradition and the manufactured rationality of bureaucracies (to paraphrase Weber). Some things, like rules of language or of gender roles or our ideas of the proper color garb to wear at funerals were devised in their traditional essence long before anyone now living was born. To children such rules seem as much a part of the natural order as are trees or rocks. The individual is free to break these rules but at the cost of widespread disapproval or worse from associates.

Other social contingencies are the on-going achievement of certain kinds of organizations. In your examples of bagel shops and speed limits, you're pointing to business and government bureaucracies respectively, which are good examples of these organizations. By setting up and giving orders to maintain certain social contingencies, the people in charge of these organizations are controlling their own perceptions of social order and material well-being, if not directly controlling other people's behavior. An active alignment of goals on the part of the people belonging to the organization is necessary to keep the various contingencies in place. Undoubtedly, the people arranging such contingencies by virtue of their organization position can be regarded as more powerful than those who are only subject to contingencies arranged by others.

I don't think sociologists have paid enough attention to the "man-made contingencies" which are embodied in physical objects. Many organizations are busily engaged in remaking the physical world (by building buildings and roads or by turning out millions of manufactured items) in ways which rapidly use up "degrees of freedom" in our common environment and thus facilitate some behaviors while making others nearly impossible. Anyone is free to use the interstate highways, for instance, but only in a motor vehicle not on roller blades. (Us PCT folks just can't resist those driving metaphors, can we?) Surely such contingencies built into the physical environment are also an important expression of social power.

Here we go again, talking about "social control" but hopefully in a more useful framework than some earlier exchanges!

Best regards, Kent

Date: Mon Dec 13, 1993 9:19 am PST
Subject: Contingencies; leaning on the world

[From Bill Powers (931213.0930 MST)] Kent McClelland (931212)

Good, I'm glad you agree about contingencies. There's obviously more to say on the subject; I just wanted to point out that contingencies aren't an active form of social control. They can, of course, be used as part of a control process by a person ("If you do that again I'll clobber you"), in the form of a threat or a promise. They can also be used to deny responsibility: "If you don't give me what I want, the bloodshed will be on your head."

Chuck Tucker pointed out to me that his use of the term "arrangements" means about the same as what I mean by contingencies, and that I couldn't see what he meant until I had put it in my own words. Too true.

Best, Bill P.