Between Deference and Distinction:

Interaction Ritual through Symbolic Power in an Educational Institution*

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to juxtapose, integrate, and expand Pierre Bourdieu’s research on symbolic power (the power to define) with Erving Goffman’s analysis of deference and demeanor. Drawing from Goffman, I argue that symbolic power is generated during social interactions in which people engage in rituals of deference and demeanor. To acquire deference, people must exhibit the appropriate demeanor towards others. Deference is symbolic power in potential form: once deference is acquired, it can be deployed as the symbolic power to frame (define) actions, situations, and events in ways that induce compliance and constitute the social order. Drawing from Bourdieu, I argue that these interactions are shaped by forms of cultural capital that are linked to larger institutions. Cultural capital is a tool people use to craft a demeanor that is presented in interaction. When other people value this capital, it generates deference.

To bring this conceptualization of social interaction and symbolic power to life, I utilize field notes, interview, and video data from a two-year study of “Costen Elementary School” (K-8). At Costen the principal (“Mrs. Kox”) and assistant principal (“Mr. Carrol”) struggled—at times successfully, at times unsuccessfully—to acquire deference and to deploy symbolic power during interactions with teachers and the Local School Council. Together, the theory and analysis fill a troubling gap in the microsociological tradition: too often the role of power is absent from the “interactionist” toolkit and the conceptualization of deference and symbolic power provides new leverage for understanding the links between social interaction and social order.

INTRODUCTION

Shaking her head no, Laura tells me “She’s so overwhelmed and she lets it show, she has to hide it. Like if I’m overwhelmed in the classroom I don’t let the kids know, because you lose that respect. And that’s what she’s done. She’s lost that respect, and now it’s too far gone.” (Field notes)

This quote comes from Laura, a teacher at Costen Elementary School, regarding her principal, Mrs. Kox. I had asked Laura if there was anything Mrs. Kox could do to salvage a school in turmoil, and her response summed two years of conflict: “She’s lost that respect, and now it’s too far gone.” Despite the rational-legal authority Mrs. Kox could harness as principal, something was missing, a particular kind of power that does not reside in bureaucratic rules. The power Kox lacked is more elusive, residing in ill-defined notions of “respect,” but no less important for
running an organization. Euphemized as “leadership,” it is a “gentle, disguised form” of power (Bourdieu 1990a), a symbolic abstraction of the interactions between people.

The goal of this article is to model this elusive symbolic power by exploring how it operates in and through social interaction. To do so, I draw from the work of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu first developed the concept of symbolic power, and as we will see, he examines how symbolic power operates at the institutional level of fields, and at the micro level via what he calls the “habitus.” However, his analysis of the social interactions that mediate these micro and macro levels is underdeveloped. In contrast, Goffman provides a virtuoso account of social interactions, but neglects to develop a notion of power that is implicit in his work. I argue that, together, their works provide a fuller model of symbolic power.

**JUXTAPOSING, INTEGRATING, AND EXPANDING GOFFMAN AND BOURDIEU**

**Social Interaction as Rituals of Defere
cence and Demeanor**

Goffman (1967:56) defines deference as activity “by which appreciation is regularly conveyed” from one person to another. Examples include the “little salutations, compliments, and apologies which punctuate social intercourse” (57). Demeanor is behavior that expresses “to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable and undesirable qualities” (58). To receive deference, one must exhibit the appropriate demeanor towards others. As a result, “individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left” (85).

Deference and demeanor tie us together in social interactions, and during these interactions people use impression management to cultivate deference by tailoring their demeanor to suit the perceived preferences of others (Goffman 1959). The people present in a
situation are an audience that bounds these interactions (Hall 1985). Although audiences and presentational preferences vary across settings, the basic process is general. Nonetheless, success is not a given. Returning to the example that opens this paper demonstrates the pitfalls of failure: “She’s [Mrs. Kox] so overwhelmed and she lets it show, she has to hide it. Like if I’m overwhelmed in the classroom I don’t let the kids know, because you lose that respect. And that’s what she’s done.” Unable to keep her composure during interactions, Kox struggled to foster deference from teachers.

According to Goffman, rituals of deference and demeanor are the key for understanding the maintenance of the interaction order. If we could give ourselves deference, society might “disintegrate into islands inhabited by solitary, cultish men, each in continuous worship at his own shrine” (1967:58). However, in emphasizing the maintenance and stability of interaction, Goffman downplays how social contexts change (Glaser and Strauss 1964:675). This is ironic, because symbolic power and change are implicit in his work. To quote Goffman, “Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind. . . it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others. . . This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation” (1959: 3-4). Controlling definitions allows one to control interaction, but it is also the symbolic power to change interactions. At stake is not only the maintenance of an order, but also the very power to define the meanings and actions that comprise that order; an important but unnoticed form of control.

**Bourdieu and Symbolic Power**

The most developed treatment of symbolic power to date is found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s approach is premised on the interrelated concepts of social space (a collection of “fields”), capital, and habitus. Bourdieu views society as a social space where
people exist in relation to each other on the basis of their economic capital (money and material resources), cultural capital (stratified lifestyle tastes, preferences, and knowledge), and social capital (networks) (1986, 1989, 1990a). To understand this conceptually, imagine a three-dimensional space with the three forms of capital as axes, each ranging from capital that is highly valued in society to capital that is not highly valued. People exist in this social space in relation to each other based on the volume and composition of their economic, cultural, and social capital. This social space has an objective existence, and it guides and constrains our behavior (Bourdieu 1990a). At the same time, people move in space. These actions are manifestations of what Bourdieu calls the “habitus,” defined as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (1977:72). A person’s habitus is structured by the objective conditions in which the individual develops, namely the cultural, economic, and social capital of their parents. These conditions inculcate dispositions that reflect the person’s position in social space. These dispositions structure subjective actions and experiences, and tend to reproduce the “objective” conditions from which the habitus is born. Thus, the dispositions of the habitus are largely unconscious and have an element of symbolic power: the habitus operates as a “scheme of perception,” that defines our reality as we go about our practices in daily life. To quote Bourdieu (1990b:154), “The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history.”

While symbolic power operates at the micro level via the dispositions of the habitus, symbolic power also operates at a macro level via what Bourdieu calls “fields.” In essence, fields are institutions. They are slices of social space, each slice structured according to the forms of capital valued in that institutional arena. Fields are repositories of symbolic power: Those who possess the forms of capital valued by the field are consecrated with this power, and they define
reality in ways that advance their interests (Bourdieu 1991). Because this defined reality is taken for granted and misrecognized as “natural,” it provides the basis for action.

Research in the Bourdieuan tradition outlines the operation of symbolic power at the micro-habitus and macro-field levels, but these works shed little light on how symbolic power is created and used in *face-to-face interactions*. As we will see, the position of Costen Elementary School in the overall field of education and the habituses of the people involved with the school have some effect on the interactions between teachers, administrators, and the members of the Local School Council, but the interactions themselves constitute who has symbolic power.

Goffman’s focus on deference and demeanor provides an analysis of these neglected interactions, and Bourdieu’s discussion of cultural capital places an additional constraint on interactions. Since Bourdieu first introduced the term, cultural capital has become synonymous with an array of cultural resources. My use is based on what Bourdieu (1986) terms *embodied cultural capital*. This form is tightly linked to the dispositions of the habitus, and Bourdieu describes it as a “style of expression,” “a durable way of standing, speaking, walking” (1990b:70). This embodied expressive style is deeply ingrained and not fully conscious (Wacquant 2004). Acquired through the life course, it is the expressive equipment that we carry into interactions (Cahill 1998:140).

Thus, I argue that cultural capital is a tacit tool that people use to craft a demeanor presented during interaction. When others value this capital, it generates deference. Deference is symbolic power in potential form: once deference is acquired, it can be deployed as the symbolic power to frame (define) actions, situations, and events in ways that induce compliance and constitute the social order. As the principal at Costen School, Mrs. Kox had the formal
authority to make certain decisions and to set the agenda. What she lacked was the symbolic power to control the meanings the teachers attached to her agenda, and how they responded.

Mrs. Kox and Mr. Carrol, The Teachers and the Local School Council: Social Interactions and Symbolic Power at Costen Elementary School

The Field of Education and Mrs. Kox’s Embodied Cultural Style

With the rise of accountability policies, the field of public K-12 education has shifted from a situation in which schools and their subunits had relative autonomy to a more formal, hierarchical, authoritative situation (Ladd 1996). Kox’s embodied cultural style fit this new institutional order. Like these reforms, Kox was tough and direct. She made decisions by the book and based on a worldview that valued holding people accountable. As she told me, she “doesn’t play games” and is “like a rock.” As we will see, the Local School Council (LSC) hired her for these very reasons.

Kox’s rule-like orientation and reverence for authority was not a fleeting mannerism. Rather, it was her baseline approach to social interaction. She acquired this style throughout the life course. Kox is a first-generation Chinese immigrant. There is an established literature on the parenting practices of Asian families (Dornbusch et al. 1987; Lin and Fu 1990; Chao 1994), and coming from a culture in which rules matter, obedience is valued, and authority is an honor, it is not surprising that this embodied style shaped her interactions with the staff.

However important family socialization may have been, Kox’s early educational experience was equally important. When I asked about her childhood, she offered an interesting comparison to her current life at Costen:

It was very traditional and I attended Catholic Schools. It was the way children interact with teachers. You never sat at a table and chairs with a teacher. It was very different. And you always raise your hand before you speak and here you just (pauses and shrugs), so it’s an adjustment. (Interview transcript)
Kox was educated in Catholic schools, and taught in them for seven years. Catholic schools are known for their authoritarian approach (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993), and when Kox moved to the public system, she built on this foundation. She told me: “If I know I’m right, I’m not giving in,” because “I worked under a new principal when I first became an assistant and she has gotten a lot of resistance, and I saw how she handled them (teachers). And she is a very strong person and she never backed down” (interview transcript).

When Kox was an assistant principal she was accepted as a fellow in the Principal Leadership Training in Education (PLTE) program, a joint venture between an elite business school and a prestigious school of education. Kox loved her experience in PLTE because “Business people have a different orientation to improvement. They have a better sense of urgency” (interview transcript). Kox said she learned about two types of leaders at PLTE, “The leader who has a lot of structure (and then), a ‘symbolic someone’ who is articulate and has a good P.R. personality.” Kox identified with the former: “I don’t seek to be popular. I don’t seek to be well liked” (Interview transcript). At PLTE her authoritative style was fused with a focus on the bottom line, all of which fit policy trends. Accountability reforms are tough and rigid, and so was Kox.

As a delegate for the Local School Council (LSC), Kox would seem to be the perfect “colonel” to implement these reforms at Costen. At the same time, Kox did recognize the weaknesses of her style. When I asked her about the hardest part of her job, she replied “Interpersonal relationships” and said “I am not particularly strong in the human resource aspect. . . I tend to say directly what I feel. Get to the point and keep an eye on the goal and reach the goal” (Interview transcript). Likewise, the Chair of the LSC (Stan Feierman) praised Kox but said: “Denise (Kox) doesn’t mince any words,” and is “very business like and very—and has
high expectations and doesn’t get too close to anybody” (interview transcript). In another interview Kox said that her style could be problematic. When I asked why, she said: “I guess because we were all brought up differently. With a faculty of a hundred and staff of a hundred people, all of us are brought up differently, with different family values and standards” (interview transcript).

In short, Kox had a deeply ingrained cultural style that she acquired through her life experience: commanding and goal-oriented, with a reverence for rules and authority and a drive for improvement. Depending on how this type of capital is perceived and valued by others in various institutional contexts, it can generate deference and symbolic power, or create contempt.

**Kox’s Interactions with Teachers: The Struggle for Deference and Symbolic Power**

I guess Mrs. Kox is on a rampage today, (tersely imitating Kox) ―Why do I have all these people in my office??!!‖ I don’t care if she’s principal, she can’t treat me like that. You have to give respect to get it. (Field notes)

This quote comes from Delsa, a teacher’s aide. During my fieldwork I heard many such laments, and these responses typified how Kox struggled during interactions with teachers.

To understand this struggle, we must consider the context and audience for these interactions. Even though Kox’s commanding style fit the new emphasis on accountability, it did not fit the order the teachers had negotiated with prior administrations. A veteran teacher recalled:

The first administration—when I first started in 1991—was a man (Mr. Welch) who was very, very laid back, and we have a lot of creative teachers in this school and you pretty much were able do what you needed to do and use your creativity and kind of go with your own flow more or less. (Interview transcript)

For more than a decade the school operated according to the logic of autonomy. In this context, Kox’s authoritative style generated scorn, not deference. As one teacher sneered, “She does things ‘her way’ and gives the impression of ‘just do what you’re told’” (interview notes).
Kox’s style was not simply a descriptive tag or a set of beliefs she espoused during interviews. It was a cultural resource that colored her interactions. For example, during a staff meeting early in my observations, Kox addressed the teachers’ complaints about her interaction style:

“If you have a problem with me, come to me and we’ll have a closed door conference. I only met Mrs. Jackson (her predecessor) once. We probably talk differently and have different management styles.” Then she asked the teachers a rhetorical question: “What matters in the style, if I produce results? I am not Mrs. Jackson, and there are going to be changes. There is a business in the school now with the changes.” (Field notes)

As the meeting continued, a teacher took a sympathetic stance only to file a complaint. He said, “I wouldn’t want to be a principal” because of the pressure to raise test scores, but teachers feel like school bureaucrats are “out to get me!” Kox replied, “I hope you feel better having the chance to express yourself.” She described how she tries to improve herself, but admitted:

Mrs. Kox: “You know, you’re absolutely right, I’m not perfect.”

Mr. North: “I don’t expect you to be perfect.”

Mrs. Kox: “But that’s my goal. It may take me 50 years, but I’ll get there before I retire.” (Field notes)

Kox focused on improvement and her tough, business-like style shone through.

However, the teachers did not respond positively to this interaction. During lunch later that day, a teacher spoke fondly of a principal at another school who was “friendly to everyone.” Her colleague responded “Like here, huh?” and then told me “excuse the sarcasm” (field notes). Likewise, when I asked Mr. North what specifically bothered him about Kox, he responded: “She just doesn’t get it.” He said being principal is about “interpersonal relationships” and you

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1 It is tempting to invoke popular psychology and interpret Mrs. Kox’s, tough, strict, rule-oriented approach as her “personality.” However, by viewing Kox’s embodied style as a form of cultural capital, we emphasize how a personality is situated within an institutional context and valued (or not) when placed in an interactive relationship.
have to be “nice.” Regarding Kox’s tough style, he said: “There’s a place for that in business, but not education” (informal interview notes).

As a form of capital, Mrs. Kox’s style created little deference in this institutional context. Many teachers responded to their interactions with Kox by forwarding complaints to the school’s central office. As the year progressed, the complaints culminated in a 119-page collection of letters that was bound and sent to the school’s central office, leading to a formal investigation of Kox. A representative from the central office explained:

She (Kox) doesn’t have good human relation techniques. And you’ve gotta work with people, you’ve got to laugh at yourself. . . So if you’re going with the attitude that you’re superior to everybody and you’re not gonna have good human relation skills, I mean that’s a big part of the job. You’re gonna fail. (Interview transcript)

Although this person cites Kox’s interactive shortcomings, little came of the investigation because Kox never broke any formal rules.

After the investigation, Kox tried to change her interaction style to fit teachers’ preference for autonomy. She told me: “I think I take into – in account of how they (teachers) view things a little bit more. And try to find ways to work with them and try to look into ways that motivate them and let them see that yes, they are allowed to have input” (interview transcript). Kox realized she had to change her demeanor in order to acquire deference. Teachers saw Kox’s effort as an improvement, but were suspicious that it was only an act. For example, during a staff meeting Kox and the teachers discussed procedures for an upcoming parent-teacher open house. Teachers made a number of suggestions, and Kox expressed her preference for a formal rotation schedule. However, she left the choice to the teachers, “because I don’t want to plan something for everyone if it does not work for you.” I was impressed by Kox’s new flexibility, but at my table a teacher whispered to a colleague: “Fake. She’s fake. Everything about her is obnoxious” (field notes).
Why does this lack of deference matter? After all, Kox still had the authority of her office, and as she told me, “My role is not to be popular. It is to get things done” (interview notes). However, without deference she lacked the symbolic power to successfully frame her actions in ways that induced compliance. Take as an example the school’s student award system. Some teachers had developed their own systems to promote good behavior. However, Kox wanted one standard system as a way to measure improvement over time. Kox proposed a school-wide assembly where students would be recognized and participate in a raffle. However, Kox’s effort was met with resistance:

Brenda Donalds: Well, what happened to our ribbons? This is the first time EVER for a quarter we didn’t have certificates or ribbons or something. We ALWAYS had something that goes with the report card, ALWAYS-

Mrs. Kox: (Interrupting) It takes time to order them. Does that make sense to you? (Donalds vigorously shaking her head no) It doesn’t.

Brenda: (Chuckling and raising her voice in pitch, seeming disbelief) Absolutely not. Why don’t we cover like, ahead of time, or we could say, I said to the kids, “You know, the awards aren’t here,” and I put their names on the board.

(The group talks for a while about different rewards and their availability)

Mrs. Kox: I cannot have teachers come up to me - first of all, teachers do not understand budgeting, no offense to anyone. They think that there is unlimited funding to give them whatever they need. It doesn’t happen in any school. I need a list, and someone else signs the (reimbursement). . . When five teachers submit orders, that’s doable. When you have 60 to 80 people running in, asking for private things, that’s not doable in this school. (Videotape transcript)

Brenda Donalds was not the only teacher to resist Kox’s effort. At lunch later that day, a group of primary teachers expressed their frustrations:

The group talks about how they do not want award assemblies. They like the old practice of putting ribbons in report cards. Angry, Mrs. Andretti wonders “Why do we have to do this (change things and argue) every stinkin’ year?” The others agree. No one wants to do this. Then Mrs. Andretti turns to me (since I videotaped the meeting) and says sarcastically “But we don’t understand.” I paraphrase Kox: “You don’t understand budgeting,” and Andretti says sarcastically, “Right.” (Field notes)
In this excerpt, teachers responded to two related things—the proposed change, and the interaction through which Kox proposed the change. If we focus only on the change, the resistance is surprising. The award assemblies involved almost no effort by teachers, and by taking students out of the classroom, it actually reduced their teaching labor. They seemed to be making a mountain out of a mole hill.

However, the proposal cannot be separated from Kox’s lack of deference with teachers, a problem that was exacerbated during the meeting. Kox’s awkward response to the teachers’ concerns and her explanation for the change infantilized the teachers by suggesting that they could not comprehend how much things cost. Despite Kox’s disclaimer (‘no offense’), the teachers did take offense to Kox’s statement that they did not understand budgeting.

Kox lacked the symbolic power to frame even simple things in ways that induced compliance, making it difficult for her to (as she said) “get things done.” This was ironic, given her formal authority. Referring to the proposed award system, one frustrated teacher said Kox should invoke her authority and “just give us a list and say ‘do it.’” I asked, “If she did that, would people do what she asked?” The teacher paused, shook her head, and said “She has lost her respect, and that’s (how she acted at the meeting) not going to get it back” (field notes).

**Kox’s Interactions with the Local School Council (LSC): The Realization of Deference and Symbolic Power**

The LSC was part of the school, but it was a very different institutional context. In Midwest City, LSCs were created in 1985 as part of reforms premised on school-based governance. When these reforms did not increase test scores, the Mayor centralized control, appointing a “Chief Executive Officer” of city schools and giving birth to accountability. LSCs became a part of the accountability mechanism, and in this context the same commanding,
aggressive, cultural capital that offended teachers appealed to the LSC. With deference in the
eyes of the LSC, Kox had the symbolic power to redefine the LSC’s method of principal
evaluation in a way that protected her from the teachers’ attacks.

When the LSC hired Kox, Stan Feierman (the chair) explained:

The dictates that come from the Board of Ed are much more severe, the whole issue of
testing being the only thing that matters, accountability is very tight all the way around.
The only person in the school who’s really responsible is the principal, and we needed to
know we had someone who could really take the lead. (Interview transcript)

Prior to my arrival at Costen, Mrs. Kox had already impressed the LSC. Stan told me Kox “was
far and away the best (candidate)” because “she seemed very tenacious.” He elaborated:
“You’ve gotta be a little nuts to be a principal. . . You have to be a little grandiose, you have to
be authoritarian” (interview transcript). The “authoritarian” cultural style that teachers resented
appealed to Stan, and he thought Kox was the best person to “take the lead” in the era of
accountability. Likewise, when I asked the LSC secretary what made Kox a good candidate, she
commented on Kox and her assistant principal, Mrs. Milbern: “I think they’re very tough. I
think they’re very no nonsense. They’re not afraid of confrontation” (interview transcript).
Through these positive evaluations the members of the LSC paid deference to Kox.

The LSC was receptive to Kox because her tough, demanding style fit the logic of
accountability. Take this example during a fall 1999 LSC meeting:

Kox begins her report to the LSC: “I’ll admit a lot of the report, time is so short in the
day, I can’t tell you how short the day is,” but “bear with me” because she put it together
quickly. Kox tells the LSC, “It really takes time for leadership, my mentor told me five
years” just to get things in place and start making changes. Nonetheless, “we do have a
form and a binder” for the teachers for their grade level team meetings. Fred Josten asks
why the teachers need a binder, and Mrs. Kox explains that the binder will be used by the
teachers to take minutes at their meetings and will be available for review. The binders
will also help the administration identify problems.

Kox continues by saying “Sometimes Jessica says, ‘Why are you in the building so much,
so long?’ So I thought I would bring some of the work to you.” Then Kox holds up a
stack of “500 forms” that serve as mid quarter failure notices and remediation plans. “So every teacher, you need to identify to the parents what needs to be improved,” and Kox points to a long checklist on the form. Then Kox drops the forms onto the table with a loud THUNK and Jessica and Stan laugh (in a tone I interpret as appreciative). Kox explains that the forms are a way to “start tracking. We have students failing and repeating grades more than once.” As Kox passes around some of the forms, Jessica looks at them and exclaims “Wow!” (I interpret as impressed). (Field notes)

During this interaction Kox went to great lengths to show the LSC how she had created rules and standards in order to hold teachers accountable for their meetings and for their students.

Mrs. Kox’s cultural capital worked in this institutional context. Once she had acquired deference in the eyes of the LSC, Kox was able to define herself as successful despite the investigation and the opposition of the teachers. She accomplished this by redefining the LSC’s method of principal evaluation.

One of the duties of the LSC was to evaluate the principal. During Kox’s first year at Costen, the LSC used the standard Midwest City protocol. This protocol included teacher feedback which voiced harsh, personal criticisms of Kox. Citing a policy that the LSC cannot comment on issues of a personal nature, the LSC members left many of the teacher criticisms out of their report. The LSC gave Kox a very positive evaluation, but this sparked another wave of complaints. The following year Kox learned of an alternative evaluation program called MEA (“Merit in Evaluating Administration”). Kox was attracted to MEA because it was “results oriented”—based on reaching targeted goals while minimizing the political aspects of evaluation. Kox told the LSC that she wanted to try the program, explaining: “What is nice about it is the concept, ‘What business matters?’” Then she gave the floor to the MEA representative who explained that the program “is a more contemporary way of looking at evaluation that tends to be more results oriented where people understand what they are being evaluated on. It’s not a personality contest” (videotape transcript, emphasis added).
This program took evaluation out of the “personality contest” where Kox was weakest with teachers. The catch was the time and energy involved: six hours of weekend training for each person, in addition to the labor of the evaluation itself and the effort involved in switching from the old format to the new one. As the LSC discussed the proposal, Stan reminded them “It’s a lot of work” and “everybody realizes that we’re all in this for six hours?” The members responded yes, and then voted unanimously to participate in the program.

Introducing a new evaluation program did not require much symbolic power, but getting the LSC to comply did. For unpaid volunteers with other professional and family obligations, the new program involved a large labor cost. Kox had no formal authority over the LSC, but she had enough symbolic power to define this sacrifice as a worthy investment. The LSC accepted the program, went through the extensive training, and as a result Kox received another positive evaluation without the uproar created by the previous evaluation.

Mr. Carrol’s Interactions and Symbolic Power with Teachers

As a result of the investigation of Kox and her contentious relations with teachers, when the opportunity arose to hire a new assistant principal, the Central Office pressured Kox to hire Mr. Carrol, a veteran of Midwest City Schools. Though principals have the right to choose their own assistants, Kox followed the recommendation (perhaps recognizing that her credibility with the Central Office was at stake). At first this choice pleased no one at Costen. At an LSC meeting, Stan said they needed someone who would be “more loyal to Denise (Kox) than the Central Office,” and another member said, “Denise, we don’t want you training your replacement” (field notes). Meanwhile, the teachers derided Mr. Carrol as the Central Office “pet” and “buddy”, and saw him as a spy or crusader.
Most people expected Carrol to enforce immediate changes, but he did not. He told me: “I think as administrator you have to understand sometimes to win the war does not mean you have to win every little battle. And you have to humble yourself and compromise in certain areas. Get what you want in the long run” (interview transcript). Where Kox described herself as “like a rock,” Carrol was pliable, a contrast immediately evident in their clothing: Kox wore the standard school uniform every day, Carrol preferred a variety of fashionable sport coats. Where Kox had a commanding style that fit the logic of accountability, Carrol was flexible and tailored his interactions to suit the teachers, a cultural style that resonated with their preference for autonomy (for a discussion of the role of gender and race in these interactional processes, please see the original SPQ article).

Take as an example Mr. Carrol’s introduction to the school at a staff meeting:

Mr. Mondello (the counselor) says, “It is my pleasure to introduce Mr. James Carrol.” Carrol begins by saying (with a toothy smile) “I started about a half hour ago, I’ve been looking at your handbook and I’m very impressed.” He briefly talks about having “30 years in Midwest City Schools,” working at “schools this size” and “I’m very impressed with your test scores, and your attendance, and I’m here to support you.” To my surprise the teachers clap loudly. (Field notes)

Carrol used this interaction to publicize his experience and to compliment teachers. The teachers appreciated the tune he was playing enough to applaud his performance.

A few days later, as I was having lunch with two teachers, I asked them “Any first impressions of the new assistant principal?”

Tulsi smiles and says, “He’s nice, he’s very knowledgeable, he knows that he can control the situation, and is comfortable.” I ask Ann what she thinks and she says “I haven’t talked to him, but (laughs) his car (sports car) fits him.” I ask “How so?” but Ann cannot place it. Tulsi says, “He’s very disciplined, well dressed but not expensive, very upper middle class.” Ann smiles “Right.” (Field notes)

Tulsi and Ann paid considerable deference to Carrol. Tulsi valued the experience that he advertised at the meeting and his cultural capital; his “comfortable” “upper middle class” style.
Carrol also knew how to step away from a line of interaction. Consider this example from a staff meeting in which Carrol was evaluating a fire drill:

Mrs. Sizemore says that during the drill Mr. Carrol yelled at Alex (a student) for closing the classroom door. Carrol says no; Alex was not closing the door, “He was getting his coat.” But Mrs. Sizemore responds (voice rising in tone and pitch), “Alex didn’t have his coat” and was closing the closet door, not the classroom door. Then Mr. Carrol relents (frowning slightly) “Well, OK.” (Field notes)

As the disagreement escalated, Carrol retreated. Instead of berating Sizemore for losing track of a student, he “gave face” to her, allowing her to retain a favorable presentation of self in front of her colleagues (Goffman 1955, 1959)—even though she challenged his viewpoint. This style was different from Kox’s (“If I know I’m right, I’m not giving in”). However, it was still in his interests: Carrol gave face in the short-term so he could “get face” in the long-term. In doing so he was not simply restoring the interaction order, he was also safeguarding the interactive means through which teachers paid deference to him.

Carrol also took advantage of interactions that were not related to formal tasks. For example, I observed him hanging out in John Pearl’s classroom before a staff development day:

John smiles and tells me “James” (Carrol) is a “great musician” and he can play the guitar and the drums. Then Carrol tells us: “This is a solo I learned,” setting his fingers loose on a guitar. Then he looks at John with a grin and asks, “Ya know any Beatles?” As John smiles and nods, Carrol says, “Name that tune,” and starts to play a song. John pulls out a three ring binder packed with music and starts to name Beatles songs. John says “Hold Your Hand.” Carrol starts to play, and John sings along. Then they play “Hey Jude.”

They finish and get ready for a staff meeting. Carrol leaves ahead of us, and John tells me “He’s a nice guy, and he came at just the right time.” Then he adds “It’s better now (with Carrol at the school) don’t you think?” (Field notes)

Mr. Carrol had a certain cultural capacity; familiarity with the Beatles was a common cultural element around which he could build a successful interaction with this teacher.
Later that day at the staff luncheon, Carrol and I sat with John Pearl, Brenda Donalds, and Mike North. As we ate, a teacher approached Carrol and told him that the students who set up the luncheon wanted to give away the centerpieces, but there were not enough to go around:

Carrol stands, smiles, and tells the room that the kids want to give away the centerpieces, so “Who has a joke to tell?” (As the ‘price’ for a centerpiece). The teachers laugh, but no one will share as people chuckle, “Too dirty!” Laughing, Carrol says, “OK, who knows the cold weather procedure?” (A procedure he is revising. I interpret as making fun of himself). Someone answers “20’s!” and gets a centerpiece. Carrol continues: “Whose birthday is it?” and “Who’s pregnant?” The teachers laugh and seem to enjoy themselves. When Carrol rejoins our table Mr. North compliments him: “Nice job, Mr. Carrol.”

Mrs. Kox wanders over to the table for a moment, and the talk immediately turns to business, as Kox and Brenda discuss some sort of follow up to a field trip.

Kox, Brenda, and Mike depart, leaving John Pearl, Carrol, and me behind. John smiles and tells Mr. Carrol, “In the short time that I’ve known you, it surprises me that you’re not in the classroom.” (Field notes)

During my time at Costen, I never observed Kox joking with the teachers with such ease, and it was telling that when she stopped by the table, the discourse moved back to business. Kox’s cultural style was so closely wedded to her position as principal that she could not distance herself from that role. She was unable to tap into the informal interactions that were a resource for Carrol, in part because she did not possess the requisite cultural capital. In contrast, Carrol presented a demeanor that distanced him from his formal position and humanized him in the eyes of the teachers such that, at least for Pearl, Carrol felt like one of them (a classroom teacher).

The deference that Carrol acquired during interactions with teachers was symbolic power in potential form. In time, Carrol deployed this symbolic power to successfully redefine the school’s copy policy, putting a more restrictive policy in place of a liberal one. While copy policies may seem trivial to an outsider, any teacher can tell you how important they are for their daily work. Moreover, the copy policy was a contentious issue in the past. One of Kox’s first policy changes held the teachers accountable for their use of the copy machine. Copies were
monitored and limited, requests had to be made via a form 24 hours in advance, and then an office aide would make the copies. As with the award assemblies, teachers got angry and complained to the LSC. After the investigation, Kox tried to appeal to the teachers by reliberalizing the copy procedures. She recalled how she told them:

I try to accommodate. . . Not many schools that I know in the system allow teachers to have unlimited use of copiers and papers the way we do at Costen School. . . I’m doing it because I’ve learned – I’ve learned to listen to your needs. . . I’m learning to respond to you and in return, I need the same respect. (Interview transcript)

Kox’s reliberalization of the copy policy was another effort to gain deference from the teachers. However, the copies remained an administrative problem: too many people making too many copies and resulting in too many repair bills. Kox and Carrol decided that a system of accountability was required, but this time Carrol notified teachers:

Referring to a packet of new forms Carrol tells them, “With a school of 1600 students” the administration has to make adjustments, and “I have to streamline my own methods as well. . . We have an inordinate amount of money spent on the copy machines” (I immediately think that the teachers will not like where this is going). Repairs are very expensive, so he is assigning office aides to “use the machine to do multiple copies.” For sets of 35 copies, the teachers will fill out a form and make a request with 24 hours notice. For more than 35 copies they should “allow another day.” He adds that miscellaneous copies can be made on the Lanier copier. Each teacher has been assigned a code, “and we’ll keep a running tally of how many copies we’ll use.” He tells the teachers to “Please try and bear with us.” He has had success with this policy at another school, but “if this doesn’t work, we’ll revisit it.”

Then Jackie Mitchell (veteran first grade teacher) says the Lanier copier “isn’t working.” Carrol responds, “It will be up and running today, and you’ll have your codes.” Jackie says something about other copiers not working, and Carrol replies, “I just had ‘em fixed.” Jackie responds “Great.”

Carrol continues, “These things (copies) are related to what you do in class,” so the copies will be a high priority. Mrs. Granger (veteran second grade teacher) comments “They (the aides) aren’t gonna want to stop and copy for us.” Carrol assures her “I’ll deal with that, that’s an administrative problem.” (Field notes)

In changing the copy policy, Carrol imposed on the teachers’ autonomy. In doing so, he engaged in considerable interactive work. He spoke of the need to “streamline” procedures in a large
school, the cost of repairs, and the success of the policy at another school. By engaging in “motive talk” (Mills 1940; Hewitt and Stokes 1975), Carrol anticipated complaints and prepared the teachers for what was coming. He assured them that the Lanier machines were ready, all copiers had been repaired, and that he would keep the office aides in line.

Given the complaints that followed Kox’s earlier changes to the copy policy, I expected considerable resistance. Because copies provide integral materials for the work of teaching, this policy disrupted the teachers’ control over their work and had a large labor cost. Instead of making copies as needed, teachers needed to have the materials ready 24 hours in advance, which also affected lesson planning. To my surprise, their response was tame:

As the group of primary teachers finish their lunch, I ask them for their impressions on the new copy procedures. Jackie Mitchell says, “It’s too early to tell, ask in a week.” Carrie Andretti says: “To be honest” the change doesn’t bother her. Ramona tells me she did it for the first time yesterday, and it worked fine. (Field notes)

I waited, but the complaints did not materialize. That summer I asked Kox to reflect on the important issues that arose during the year. She replied: “The copy machine was one of the issues that came up. It’s on ongoing issue. But it kind of died down somewhat now” (interview transcript). What was so interesting is that the policy Carrol introduced was almost identical to the one Kox tried. Part of the success may have involved better implementation by the office aides. However, the success also reflected the legacy of interactions between Carrol and the teachers, and when Kox reflected on the new policy, she did not address the content of the policy itself. Instead she cited Carrol: “He has good people skills.”

Equipped with deference and the symbolic power that it affords, Carrol could define the copy policy in a way that successfully introduced accountability into the school. Even though she had more formal authority, Kox could not. For example, a teacher told me that Carrol was a successful leader. She explained: “I think a prime example . . . he instituted that copy machine
thing. There wasn’t much grumbling. I haven’t heard much grumbling about it. And I have feeling that if Kox had instituted that, it would have been disregarded” (interview transcript). Without symbolic power, when Kox did the same thing she was crucified by the teachers.

CONCLUSION

In the routine flow of day-to-day life, power is seldom exercised as overt physical force. (Bourdieu 1991:23)

The simplest way to use power is. . . to appear not to be using it. (Hall 1985:340)

When people think about power, the inclination is to think about brute force, control over resources, rewards, and punishments, or a position in a hierarchy. However, sociologists have long recognized that power is not always so concrete. Sometimes it is more ethereal and harder to identify. This type of power is “symbolic.” It involves control over the meanings and definitions that provide a guide for action. Not as overt or tangible as other forms of control, it is a “gentle, disguised” form of power (Bourdieu 1990:128), but it is no less important for understanding social order.

Taken together, deference and symbolic power provide a meso-level account of the interactional-institutional link. This account integrates and expands Goffman and Bourdieu in a way that enriches their respective traditions. The well known criticism of Bourdieu’s sociology is that it is structurally over determined (King 2000). Bourdieu examines how symbolic power operates at the macro level of fields and the micro level of the habitus, but the vital role of interaction is obscured. This article fills this gap in a way that is socialized, but not overdetermined. Habitus, capital, and institutional fields matter, but interactions are the vehicle through which deference is created and deployed as the symbolic power to define actions, situations, and events in ways that induce compliance.
Much of this conceptualization lies dormant in Goffman’s research on interaction rituals, and this project expands Goffman’s emphasis on sociality in the here-and-now by considering larger institutional pressures. People acquire capital based partly on their position in macro social space, for example Kox’s socialization and experiences in the field of education. When people enter social settings they bring their capital with them, and it colors their interactions with various audiences. Kox’s authoritative style was a form of cultural capital that the teachers rejected. Unlike Carrol, she did not have the cultural capacity to impress teachers by singing Beatles songs. However, her authoritative style did generate considerable deference in another institutional context—the Local School Council.

By enriching both traditions, this paper provides a better understanding of the social order at Costen School. A traditional Bourdieuian “field” analysis would predict that Kox would have symbolic power due to her position in the field of education. After all, her authoritative cultural style fit the institutional logic of accountability that now dominates public education. However, the interactions between Kox and the teachers were problematic and they limited Kox’s symbolic power despite her position in the field. A traditional dramaturgical analysis of “pure” impression management would miss how these interactions were shaped by cultural capital, and how they were consequential to the evolving school order. It matters that Kox lacked the symbolic power to frame her actions in ways that would create teacher compliance. It matters that she did have the symbolic power to redefine the Local School Council’s method of principal evaluation. It matters that Carrol had the power to redefine policy during his interactions with the teachers.

Because social psychologists have long argued that actions are shaped by definitions and meanings, deference and symbolic power are central to the field and contribute to interactionist approaches to sociology. Critics have long argued that various interactionist approaches have
ignored social structure (Kanter 1972). This criticism is misplaced, as numerous interactionists have explicitly incorporated social structure into their research (Strauss 1978; Maines 1982; Fine 1984). A more apt criticism involves the limited treatment of power in interactionist paradigms. These power relations are both structural (for example Kox’s formal authority as principal), and, as I have argued, symbolic.

Along with efforts by Hall (1985, 1997) this article builds an interactionist understanding of power. Equipped with this understanding, interactionist sociology is poised to make a larger contribution to the study of social order and organizations. The study of social order is dominated by a macro tradition that extends from Durkheim to “new institutionalism.” The macro influence is especially evident in organizational sociology where new institutional theory holds that people are the “carriers” of larger institutional forces (DiMaggio 1988). This non-agentic view assumes a close correspondence between institutional forces (like accountability reforms) and local action. This view has been criticized for depicting people as institutional “dopes,” and many scholars have reached towards microsociology in an effort to overcome this problem (Fligstein 2001). The ongoing challenge is to recognize the ways in which institutions are inhabited by people doing things together (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Hallett forthcoming). By emphasizing the interactions to which new institutionalism has been blind, the ideas developed in this article provide a remedy.

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2 Hall studies how people in one context can alter the conditions for negotiations in other contexts. He labels this “meta-power,” and defines it as “the creation and control of distal social conditions and situations (1997:398).
References:


