JSSE

Journal of Social Science Education

2023, Vol. 22(1)

Edited by:

Andrea Szukala

Article

Civic reasoning about power issues: The criticality of agency, arena and relativity

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Keywords: Social science education, civic reasoning, critical thinking, power analysis, phenomenography

Highlights:

- The idea of power and power analysis is central to citizenship education
- Students' different conceptions of power facilitate diverse ways of analysing power issues
- Agency, arena and relativity are critical aspects to focus on when teaching about power relations
- Qualified civic reasoning about power issues requires conceptual and contextual knowledge
- Power analysis can be seen as a tool for subjectification and empowerment in social science

Purpose: The study examines students' conceptions of power and important aspects of teaching for developing the ability to analyse power relations in social science.

Methodology: Phenomenography is used in the analysis of 155 student essays, to identify different ways of analysing societal power issues.

Findings: When conducting a qualified analysis of a societal power issue, it is crucial that students discern that power is tied to an agent, that power is exercised through agency in specific contextual power arenas, and that they understand how power is relative to the power of other agents in the same arena.

Research limitations: The study focuses on Swedish upper secondary students. Comparisons with other groups of learners are welcomed.

Practical implications: The critical aspects identified should be used as a basis for teaching designs. Findings imply that the meaning of power as a concept should be highlighted in social science teacher education.

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Suggested citation:
Tväråna. M. & Jägerskog, A.-S. (2023). Civic reasoning about power issues. The criticality of agency, arena and relativity. In: *Journal of Social Science Education 22(1).* https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-5258

Declaration of conflicts of interests: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of civics and citizenship education is to develop students' ability to participate in, and have an impact on, society (Blasko, Vera-Toscano & Diis da Costa, 2018; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz., 2001). This aim of empowering students as citizens includes nurturing their ability to examine and criticise political and social power structures. Power and power structures are at the very essence of political and social theory (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009), and the development of critical civic judgement presupposes an ability to analyse and take a stand on value-laden issues that are central to social, political and economic communities. Nevertheless, there is little research investigating how the concept of power is perceived, taught and learned in Social Science Education (SSE) [Swedish *samhällskunskap*], the primary and secondary school subject that primarily corresponds to civics and social studies in Sweden (Sandahl, Tväråna & Jakobsson, 2022). An important part of civic literacy is being able to analyse the power relations at play in the context of a specific societal issue. Having a qualified understanding of the concept of power could contribute to students' ability to do this. This article presents a study of conceptions of power among Swedish upper secondary students of SSE, and how these conceptions are associated with different ways of analysing power issues.

Social science and Social studies are widely considered to be subjects with the purpose of fostering students' critical thinking and active participation as citizens (Händle & Henkenborg, 2003; Sandahl, 2020; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This includes the encouragement of engagement and habits of democratic participation, as well as helping students to develop increased knowledge of the functions of society, qualified civic judgement and critical thinking about societal issues. Thus, the idea of subjectification and empowerment has been underlined as an especially pertinent dimension of SSE (Tväråna, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Our interest in subjectification as a dimension of citizenship education is related to the idea of agency being reinforced as a result of increased knowledge (Deng, 2021; Manzel, 2016). Recent research indicates the importance of domain-specific knowledge as a basis for critical domain-specific literacy (Blanck, 2021; Nygren, Haglund, Samuelsson, Af Geijerstam & Prytz, 2019). It is therefore reasonable to assume that an increased ability to analyse how power structures affect one's society would be beneficial for students' subjectification in terms of empowerment and agency.

This article presents results from a study conducted in collaboration with secondary school teachers of SSE. The experience among these teachers was that students' analyses of societal issues tend to be superficial and imprecise, especially when it comes to issues that do not easily fit into the formula of 'describe a problem–identify causes and consequences–propose solutions', such as power issues, since there is no consensus on the theoretical definition of power.

The purpose of this article is to present results on how students' different conceptions of the concept of power afford diverse ways of analysing societal power issues, and to describe those aspects of power that seem necessary for students to discern in order to

develop a qualified ability to analyse power issues. Such aspects could be used as a vantage point for teaching aimed at developing this ability. The results presented in this article also enable a discussion on the role of analysis of societal power issues in an empowering SSE.

2 ANALYTICAL CIVIC REASONING

In SSE, students' thinking and reasoning in relation to societal issues is often described in terms of critical thinking or critical reasoning. Concepts such as literacy and/or social science thinking/reasoning are not used in the Swedish curriculum. Instead, the term 'analysis' is frequently used. A model of causal analysis is frequently used as a description of what 'analysing' entails in SSE teaching materials. This 'causal analysis model' presents the description of a problem and identification of its causes, consequences and possible solutions, as central components (Jägerskog et al., 2018). However, in reasoning about societal power structures it is often unclear both what the problem is, and whether the power relations between different agents should be seen as part of cause, consequences or possible solutions to the problem. Instead, different interpretations of what constitutes problematic, or desired power relations are linked to different theoretical perspectives. This calls for an understanding of power and power analysis as something beyond a traditional causal analysis. In this article, we therefore view power analysis as part of analytical civic reasoning, i.e., critical thinking within SSE.

General abilities such as perspective-taking, causal thinking, abstraction, comparison, and evaluation are often highlighted as important aspects of qualitative thinking in social science. These concepts are similar to the main features of the ability to think critically that have appeared in research on critical thinking in various subjects (Abrami et al., 2008; Ennis, 1989; Facione, 2020). Many researchers today see critical thinking as contextual and deeply intertwined with specific subject content and disciplinary practices (Bailin, Case, Coombs & Daniels, 1999; Moore, 2011, 2013; Nygren et al., 2019; Willingham, 2008). In a meta-analysis of instructional interventions, Abrami and colleagues (2015) found that a combination of teaching stand-alone strategies for critical thinking with teaching that focuses on deep understanding of subject content seems to have the greatest effect on students' critical thinking, compared with either teaching stand-alone critical thinking strategies or teaching only subject-matter problems. Recent studies indicating that transfer of critical thinking skills within a subject domain is much more common than between different subject domains (Nygren et al., 2019; Tiruneh, Gu, De Cock & Elen, 2018), support the notion that content knowledge is central to critical reasoning. The term 'civic reasoning' (Tväråna, 2019) has been proposed as a dynamic concept for this subject-specific ability in SSE. In an attempt to clarify the relations between different ways of reasoning in SSE on the one hand and subject specific knowledge on the other, Tväråna (2019) relates civic reasoning to central dimensions of social science, describing three levels of societal analytic reasoning that focus on different forms of contextual knowledge and normative judgement (Table 1).

Table 1. Main dimensions of civic reasoning (adapted from Tväråna, 2019, p 140)

Level of analysis	Form of reasoning	Form of contextual knowledge	Form of normative judgement
1. Descriptive analysis	Descriptions or accounts of facts	Facts concerning a societal issue	Comparison or weighting
2. Causal analysis	Investigation or explanation	Social science explanatory models and theories	Proposals for action or conclusions about causation
3. Critical analysis	Critical examination of perspectives on a societal issue	Perspective and contested concepts	Position-taking based on critical judgement

A *descriptive* analysis focuses on descriptions of a societal issue such as statistics, and accounts of facts, and contains a comparison or weighting of these facts. The *causal* analysis focuses on an investigation or explanation of a societal issue, often using social science explanatory models and theories about social impact, and results in one or more proposals for action or conclusions about causation. In a *critical* analysis, different perspectives on a societal issue are examined on the basis of different principles and disputed concepts, something that enables a substantiated position on the issue, based on a critical judgement.

A descriptive analysis is linked to the next level of analysis—a causal analysis—since a descriptive analysis is a necessary part of a causal analysis. Causes and consequences related to a societal issue cannot be explored without a description or account of facts, and proposing suggestions for action or solutions to the issue discussed includes comparing and weighing facts. The causal analysis is, in turn, linked to the third level of societal analysis in the civic reasoning model, the critical analysis, by being a necessary part of it. Understanding different perspectives and contested concepts presuppose knowledge of different explanatory models and theories. Similarly, position-taking based on critical judgement presupposes a causal analysis.

With this view, each level of analysis is dependent on sufficient contextual knowledge of a relevant subject content (facts, theories and models, and different perspectives and principles). The element of judgement is also a consistent aspect of all levels of analysis, and thus civic reasoning is considered to always be forward-looking with a normative dimension. This gives room for a positioning in relation to what is most important, what should be done or what is problematic or desirable. The civic reasoning model thus proposes a framework for understanding how SSE can be empowering for students, by connecting contextual knowledge, such as conceptual knowledge of power, to critical judgement in civic reasoning, such as power analysis.

3 POWER AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPT

Power is a central concept in several of the academic disciplines that inform SSE, primarily political science, sociology and economics. It is also a concept that has been fundamental in political philosophy and critical theory (Fairclough, 1995, 2001). A classic definition of power is the description of power as a relationship between A and B where A has power over B to the extent that A can make B act in a way that B would not otherwise choose (Dahl, 1957). This and similar definitions of power have dominated political science since the late 1940s.

In contemporary social philosophical power theory, the social relational dimension in the concept of power is central. This dimension has been discussed since the early 1970s, most prominently by philosophers Hanna Arendt (1969) and Michel Foucault (1977), both of whom expanded the idea of power as a social phenomenon beyond the state, and described it as being intertwined with human relations, through societal institutions, structures and discourse, stressing that power is a condition for agency and subjectivity (Allen, 2002). Arendt also places emphasis on power as a collective capacity for emancipation and creation (Pinto & Pereira, 2017). The question of how a politically relevant delimitation of the concept of power relates to the significance of a social relational dimension is particularly relevant for analyses of power in social science. The debate between contemporary power theorists Peter Morriss, Keith Dowding and Pamela Pansardi illustrates this issue well.

Morriss (2002, 2012) argues that the concept of power should rather be understood as a property of individual agents, which can be described in terms of power *to* something, a kind of ‘ableness’, or the ability to act in a special way. According to Morriss, this can be distinguished from power *over* an area, which describes a relationship with other agents. According to Morriss, power should be defined as the ability of individuals rather than as the consequences of individuals' actions for other individuals. Dowding (1991) also distinguishes between ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ and argues that only the latter describes a power relationship between at least two agents.

Like Morriss, Dowding (2003) believes that it is 'power to'—the ability to act in a particular way, based on the possession of some means of power—that is the most fundamental dimension in the concept of power. Dowding emphasises that privileged positions do not in themselves mean that someone has had or has exercised power, since luck also plays a role in individual outcomes. An individual can have systematic luck without exercising power (systematic luck means that an individual is systematically favoured by the prevailing conditions—a capitalist, for example, has systematic luck in a capitalist system). The power an individual possesses always relies on means of power in the form of some kind of resource, such as a recognised position, means of coercion, or knowledge. However, while Morriss (2002) believes that the current means of power that form the basis of an individual's power do not play a role in the meaning of power, Dowding claims that the specific means of power someone has is central to whether they have power. The reason for this, according to Dowding, is that it is the relational

distribution of the means of power in a system that determines who has power (Dowding, 2008; c.f. Pansardi, 2017). Having substantial financial resources, for example, is a means of power only in relation to others who do not have equal financial resources. Dowding therefore believes that analysing power in a society involves studying the resources and preferences of different social groups and modelling their mutual relations.

Pansardi (2012b), however, opposes the distinction between 'power to' and 'power over' that both Morriss and Dowding make. Instead, she believes that power always describes social relations ('social power'). With this description, Pansardi takes the constitution of the power relationship—how it arises and is maintained—into the definition of the concept, thus distinguishing the idea of power from the idea of individual possibility or ability (Pansardi, 2012a; c.f. Allen, 1999; Clegg & Haugaard, 2009). Based on this reasoning, Pansardi defines power as "the opportunities to act that an individual has, based on her social interactions with others" (Pansardi, 2012a, p. 496). This, of course, also has consequences for what a power analysis entails.

In the section below, we present arguments for why the perspective of power presented by Pansardi, relating back to the relational notion of the concept introduced by Arendt and Foucault, is particularly relevant for power analysis in SSE.

3.1 Power analysis in and of social science education

Power, power structures and power analysis are often mentioned in overviews of content areas dealt with in Swedish social studies and civics (i.e., Lindmark, 2013; Olsson, 2016). In a review of teaching materials for social studies and civics education made by the Swedish delegation for gender equality in schools (SOU 2010:33), power appears as a key concept in the teaching material, in terms of "political power", "those in power", "women and men's power", "mass media as a power agent" and "power structures". At the same time, the concept itself is not problematised in the SOU, and it is difficult to know whether it is problematised in the teaching materials, since no one has examined exactly how the concept of power is presented in the textbooks. The Swedish government agency for development cooperation, SIDA, describes how power analysis can be used as a tool in poverty analysis, working for democratic societal change (Pettit, 2013). A problem for poverty-struck communities, Pettit argues, is that power is often regarded as a finite resource, thus implying that there is not much one as a civil citizen can do to change a current situation. In their report, SIDA encourages the use of power analysis for uncovering how

> [t]he effects of power are not just found in obvious abuses or acts of courage, but in the very fabric of our lives, in how issues are framed and decisions are made, in the ways particular kinds of people are valued or marginalised, and in the extent to which people regard themselves as capable of shaping their own destinies (Pettit, 2013, p. 10).

In this article, we understand the idea of 'power analysis' as equivalent to analysing power relations between agents, in accordance with the perspective of power presented

by Pansardi (2012a). This means taking institutional and societal structures and resources that constitute means of power into consideration, as Pansardi and Dowding suggest (Dowding, 2008; Pansardi, 2017), but also focusing on the relational aspects of power in a power analysis.

As there is a growing interest in realising an SSE that promotes a citizenship ideal with agency and awareness of political structures, power structures and knowledge about tools for agency and participation, more research is needed on what it means for students to understand the concept of power, and on what understanding of power may enable students to make a qualified analysis of societal power issues. However, even though power is described as one of the areas in which upper secondary students of SSE should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge (Arensmeier, 2015; Parkhouse, 2017), we have not found any SSE research that specifically focuses on students' understanding of either power as a concept or on their ability to make power analyses. When the concept of power occurs as an aspect of educational research, it rather tends to be used as a researcher's perspective on school activities, teaching materials and classroom interaction. Power analysis is often used as a research method for analysing power structures within educational settings (i.e., Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004; Gore, 1995), in response to the idea of empowerment of youth as a goal of civics education (c.f. Lee, White & Dong, 2021). The main focus of these studies has been children's and adolescents' participation in social science settings (i.e., Virta & Virta, 2015).

In conclusion, there is a need for further investigation of what power and power analysis means as subject content and as an object of teaching and learning. By examining what the ability to make an analysis of power relations in SSE means, we hope to contribute both to the exploration of what civic reasoning means and to an expanded knowledge of what aspects are important to focus on when teaching about power aspects of societal issues.

5 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

5.1 Methodology

The study uses phenomenography and variation theory (Åkerlind, 2012; Marton, 2015) as a theoretical framework in the analysis. A phenomenographic analysis examines the different ways in which people relate to and experience a certain phenomenon. Phenomenography has received a growing interest in educational research, particularly in the fields of science and mathematics (Lo, 2012; Marton, 2015) and in a Scandinavian setting focused on higher education (Rovio-Johansson & Ingerman, 2016). Within the field of SSE and civic educational research, the approach has been used in exploring students' understandings of economic concepts (Birke & Seeber, 2011; Davies, 2011; Jägerskog, 2020; Pang & Marton, 2005; Speer & Seeber, 2013; Björklund et al., 2022), but is otherwise less common, with the exceptions of studies on students' conceptions of justice (Tväråna, 2018, 2019) and societal issues (Jägerskog et al., 2021). In phenomenography, various ways of

relating to (describing, talking about, using, or acting in relation to) the phenomenon, are documented and categorised as a limited number of descriptions of different *conceptions* of the phenomenon (Marton, 2015; Marton & Pong, 2005; Rovio-Johansson & Ingerman, 2016). The categories of descriptions do not correspond to stable cognitive conceptions in individuals, but instead to the possible ways of experiencing and relating to the phenomenon that are expressed in the analysed material. What is expressed can thus depend on the context, such as what questions and tasks a student is faced with (Marton & Pong, 2005).

According to phenomenography, the conceptions can be placed in a so-called outcome space that puts them in relation to each other (Yates, Partridge & Bruce, 2012). There can be both horizontal and vertical relations between conceptions in an outcome space (Marton & Booth, 1997). An outcome space can be hierarchical, which means that fewer complex conceptions are included in the more complex ones. For example, the conception of a dog as 'an animal which is a pet' is included in the conception of a dog as 'an animal which is a pet and a hunting companion'. This kind of outcome space is vertically organised, so that categories of descriptions expressing more complex conceptions are placed above categories expressing fewer complex conceptions. To discern the focused phenomenon in a more complex way, it is thus necessary to discern additional aspects of the phenomenon. Another kind of outcome space is a horizontally organised one, which places categories of description expressing conceptions that are not included in one another next to each other. An example is the conception of a dog as 'an animal which is a family member' and the conception of a dog as 'an animal which is suitable for eating'. But it is also common to describe one of the conceptions in a horizontal outcome space as being more complex than another, or at least as more in line with the intended way of understanding the phenomenon.

A phenomenographic analysis enables a discussion of the differences between conceptions. When such differences are necessary for students to discern for them to experience the phenomenon in a more qualified way, they are called *critical aspects* (Marton, 2015; Pang & Ki, 2016). Critical aspects of a learning object have been shown to be a powerful point of departure in teaching (Lo, 2012; Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004; Marton & Booth, 1997).

It is important to underline that different conceptions are not considered to be linked to individuals. An individual can express different conceptions of a phenomenon in different contexts (Marton & Pong, 2005) and it is thus possible for a student to express more than one way of experiencing a phenomenon. The different parts of a student's written answer can thus be included in several categories of descriptions. It is not the students who are sorted into categories, but their ways of relating to and talking about the phenomenon. According to variation theory (Marton, 2015) a certain way of understanding a phenomenon, such as power, makes certain ways of relating to that phenomenon possible. In other words, what a student does when analysing a power issue depends on how they understand the concept of power as such.

5.2 Design of the study

The research questions are answered through an analysis of upper secondary students' written answers in the task of analysing a societal power issue. The material was generated in a collaborative research development project where two researchers, also working as upper secondary teachers, and three upper secondary teachers attempted to design teaching that helped students to develop the ability to analyse issues of power in upper secondary SSE.

5.2.1 Gathering of data

The data were collected from students at three schools in the Stockholm region, as part of a development project focusing on developing teaching that enables students to qualify their analyses of power issues in social science.

The data in the study consist of 155 student essays—73 written before and 82 written after a lesson on the concept of power. The lessons were held with three separate groups in upper secondary school year 1. Ninety-seven students aged 16–17, participated in the study. Groups one and three (61 students) were students from inner city schools with a distinct theoretical profile and an intake of students with relatively high graduation rates from lower secondary school. Group two (36 students) came from a suburban school with a culturally and socially mixed student base, greater variety in educational programmes and lower admission ratings.

The students' written answers were collected during lesson time by the teacher who usually taught SSE to each group. All groups were given the same task which was conducted using an examination programme (Digiexam), which prevented the students from exiting the web-programme while answering the essay assignment. The students were first given brief information about the research project and then asked to individually write a power analysis of recent riots in the suburbs of Stockholm. The writing time was approximately 50 minutes, and the assignment was formulated as follows (translated from Swedish):

> In recent years, we have seen examples of cases of violent riots and gross vandalism in Stockholm's suburbs. Cars have been set on fire, buildings have been vandalised and emergency vehicles have had stones thrown at them.
>
> Most people agree that something needs to be done about this problem.
>
> Write a power analysis to investigate who/what has power over who/what, and why they have that power.

After the lesson, the students were given access to their own essays, to revise and develop their analysis in a new text. Fifty-eight of the participating students wrote an essay before the lesson and a revised version after, and 39 students only wrote an essay either before or after the lesson. Since the purpose of the analysis in the study was not to measure the effect of teaching interventions on students' learning outcomes (see 5.3) but to explore

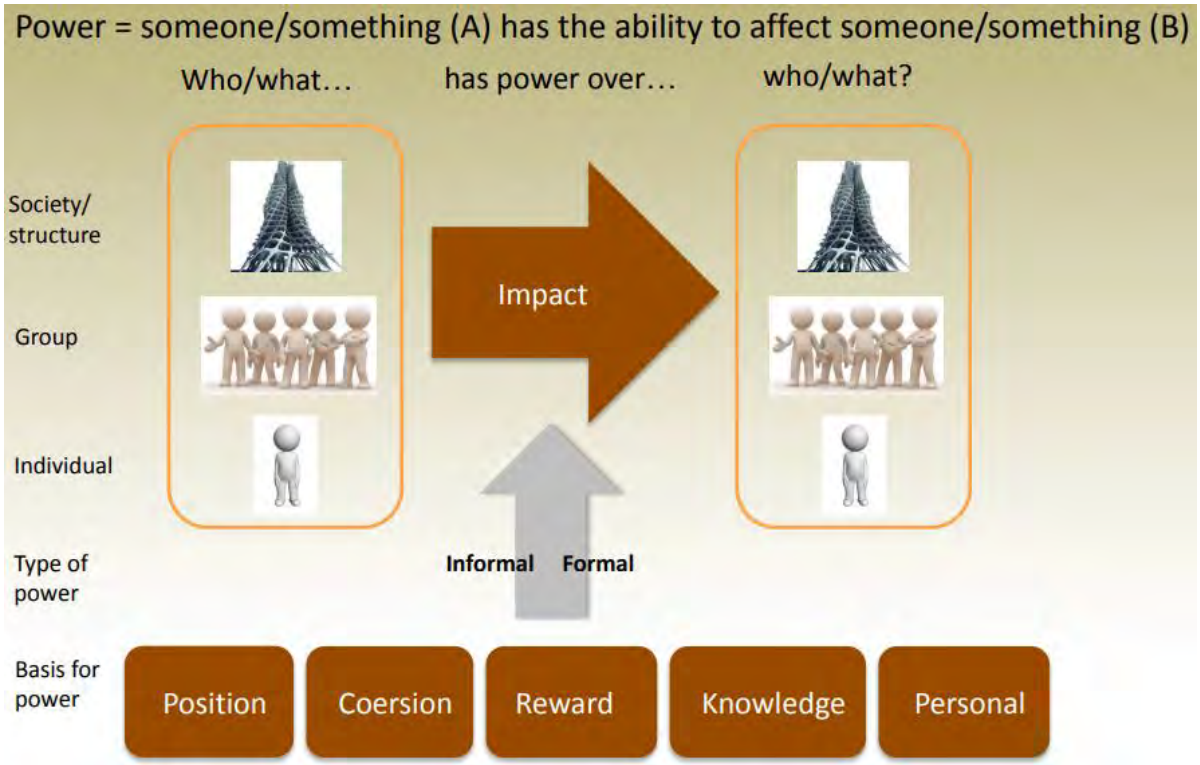
a variety of students' conceptions of power and corresponding ways of analysing power issues, all the gathered essays could be used for the analysis.

All participants in the study were over 16 years old and consent was therefore obtained directly from them. They were informed about the purpose of the study, implementation, data collection methods and data management. All students were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could cancel their participation at any time, without justification. No students chose to discontinue their participation. The written student answers were anonymised to avoid names being identified by third parties. Pseudonyms are used for the excerpts in this article.

5.2.2 Context of the material

The teaching designs in the three lessons that provided the material for this article are not themselves the focus of this article, and the study should be regarded as exploratory rather than as a design study. However, since the lessons provide the context for the material gathered, the outline of the lessons will be briefly presented. The teaching design used in all three groups was based on the introduction of a visual model (Figure 1) where the concept of power was presented as having either formal or informal grounds (such as formal positions, means of coercion, possibilities of rewarding others, relevant knowledge, or personal properties).

Figure 1. Visual model of power used in the research lessons (adapted from Brolin et al., 2018)



The model was produced as teaching material by the teachers (Brolin et al., 2018), and designed to illustrate power according to the Dahl (1957) definition described above, with the addition of the three 'levels' commonly used in Swedish SSE—individual, group and society/structure. None of the participating teachers had had any more specialised education on the concept of power than what was included in their SSE teacher education. Thus, the model in Figure 1 should not be viewed as a suggestion for exemplary teaching on this specific subject content, but rather as an example of common SSE teaching in the context of the study.

After being introduced to the concept of power through the model, the students were assigned the task of discussing the exercise of power in relation to a problematic societal issue. For one of the groups, the teacher chose football hooliganism. In the second group, the students chose the social issue themselves, resulting in discussions on sexual harassment in school and integration in Sweden. In both groups, no additional background information on the issues discussed was given to the students. In the design for the third group, the students were provided with newspaper articles as background information on a common arena for the societal power issues discussed. The issue was the 2012 youth riots in Gothenburg following the widespread harassment of young girls on Instagram, which became intensely discussed in Swedish media at the time (O'Hare, 2012).

5.2.3 Variation within the material

The choice of schools was based on the research group teachers who conducted the development project, and material was collected within the framework of these teachers' regular teaching. Thus, the selection of classes for the study was also based on the teachers who participated in the project. While the selection of participants was neither randomised nor large enough for statistically valid generalisations, the sample nevertheless provides sufficient variation for conducting a qualitative analysis using phenomenography.

As mentioned, the students' written responses were made both before and immediately after they were explicitly taught to analyse a societal power issue. In addition, the written responses were generated in relation to three lessons that slightly differed in terms of the societal issue being discussed, since the teaching design was evaluated and revised between the three research lessons. In accordance with the tradition of phenomenography, this makes possible a conscious pursuit of data that can show a significant spread of conceptions of power, which can be assumed to lend reliability to the study (Larsson, 2009). At the same time, it should be noted that all participants were Swedish upper secondary students in year 1 taking the same course in SSE, which is obligatory in all upper secondary programmes.

5.3 Analysing the material

The researchers analysed the material using a phenomenography theoretical framework and variation theory described under 5.1. The analysis followed the steps described by

Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991; see also Yates et al., 2012). First, the material was coded into themes describing what the respondents said when they wrote about power and power relations. In the second step, the themes were interpreted in response to the phenomenographic question of what conceptions of power might explain what the respondents wrote about. In this abductive analysis, the material was sorted into categories of descriptions expressing qualitatively different conceptions of power. In this step in the analysis, we worked iteratively, reading the material alone and together, comparing our tentative interpretations with the data in several revisions. During this step in the analysis, ways of analysing power issues were identified, facilitated by the different conceptions of power found in the material. In the third step of the analysis, the outcome space was created, and aspects separating different conceptions were identified. Note that the critical aspects, as well as the conceptions of the outcome space, are theoretical constructs created by the researchers to explain the empirical findings of different content themes in the material. The aspects separating the conceptions are considered critical in relation to students who have not yet discerned them (Marton, 2015).

6 FINDINGS I: FOUR CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

The first finding in the analysis is four qualitatively distinct categories of describing power. These can be explained by four underlying conceptions of power: (1) power as an object, (2) power as capacity, (3) power as relevant capacity and (4) power as potential. The different ways of experiencing power facilitate different kinds of power analyses: (i) power analysis as a description of a condition, (ii) power analysis as a description of capacities, (iii) power analysis as a calculation of responsibility and (iv) power analysis as judgement of responsibility and proposal of measures. Below, the meaning of these conceptions and the associated ways of analysing societal power issues are described and illustrated with translated excerpts from the material.

6.1 Conception 1

6.1.1 Power as an object

In a few cases, student responses expressed an understanding of power as something that exists, without being linked to a certain actor or possessor of power. Those utterances expressed, for example, that “the informal power in the suburbs has an influence over individuals in the neighbourhood” or that “[t]he formal power in society affects everybody”. From these student responses, it seemed that power was an abstract object with its own agency. The distinction between informal and formal power seen in the excerpts, which were drawn from the essays written after the lessons, probably emanates from the model of power used in the research lessons (see Figure 1). Below is another excerpt reflecting a conception of power as an object:

> The formal positional power that exists in our society is based on all individuals following the laws and rules that exist and with the help of the police and the

> judicial system that will use coercive force to punish those who violate the positional power that exists. The problem in these suburbs is that this power is not seen as the one that one should follow. (Charlie, after lesson)

In the excerpt, the student mentions the police and the judicial system as examples of instances that help "the formal positional power that exists", but it is unclear if they (the police and the judicial system) are perceived to be agents that possess this power, or if 'the power' refers to laws and/or norms of society. In these responses, the students seemed to use the term 'informal power' to describe an alternative set of norms and values that the suburban groups live by, in opposition to the current 'power regime'. Describing power in this way was, however, not very common in the material.

6.1.2 Power analysis as a description of a condition

In the responses where power was treated as a norm, rule or value, as well as an abstract object with some sort of agency of its own, the power analysis can be described as *a description of a condition*. In their analysis, the students did not consider the power relations concerning who/what has power over who/what, and why this is the case. Instead, the responses described a situation where some sort of abstract power was present and affected the situation, but where there were few visible possessors or means of power. Even if the understanding of power as an object may be considered a viable, albeit limited, perspective on power, it is not sufficient for a power analysis of the kind that was intended as a learning object in the study.

6.2 Conception 2

6.2.1 Power as a constant capacity

The utterances in the second category express a conception of power as a capacity or trait. In some responses, this takes the form of describing powerful people. Many utterances in this category focused on the means used to uphold the capacity for power. One example of this is shown in the excerpt below, where the student Carla writes about the basis for formal power in terms of laws, rules and norms:

> The power comes from the chief of the police, who assigned the police their power by giving them their work. The police chief's power comes from his or her higher position at work, which then makes his or her words stronger than those below him/her. (Carla, before lesson)

The different bases of formal power are resources that give its possessor power over someone, and they can be handed to someone by someone else. This way of conceptually equating 'power' with the means or resources that underlie someone's power over someone else, can be compared to how the word is often used, for example, in teaching aids, to describe how an actor 'has power' to do something or that someone 'seeks political power'. In such statements, 'power' often stands both for the ability to influence someone

in a certain area, and for the means of power that form the basis of this ability (for example a political mandate). As was the case with the first conception, describing power as a capacity was also more common after the introduction of the model where power was presented as either formal or informal and as having different bases. The excerpt below is from one of the essays written after a lesson:

> At the societal level, the government has positional power over both the public authorities and the suburban residents, due to the rules, laws and agreements that exist. Here we are also talking about bases such as reward power where the state-paid organisations receive a reward in the form of fees and the suburban residents receive it in the form of grants, tax-paid services and much more. The interesting thing here is that the citizens become dependent on that which is above themselves in order to have their needs met, so some kind of coercive feeling is included here as well. (Christopher, after lesson)

This student's answer seemed to be influenced by how the concept of power and its different bases of power (positions, rewards and coercion) were presented by the teacher in the research lesson.

6.2.2 Power analysis as a description of capacities

The analysis in the responses where this conception of power was prevalent consisted mainly of *descriptions of capacities* among different power agents and the power-base resources they possess. Thus, in these responses, the analysis explains *who* or *what* has power, in terms of what kind of power resources are present. But most of the responses in this category did not discuss in detail in relation to whom or what this power was exercised.

6.3 Conception 3

6.3.1 Power as a relative capacity

The third category of descriptions contains reasoning and analyses of power that focus on identifying which actors have the most *relevant* means of power. This denotes such means of power that are relevant to the specific arena that the problematic societal issue concerns. In this way of experiencing power, having power is a matter of possessing most resources relevant to being able to solve or influence the current problematic societal issue. In the excerpt below, the student reasons that even though the police are in a formal position of power, in reality, the resources that they possess are not relevant for solving the situation. Instead, the student suggests, what is needed is more resources for the suburbs. The student concludes that it is politicians who possess these resources:

> As I understand it, the police do not have much power. Then especially the young people do not show any kind of respect for the police, even though they try to help them. [...] Another reason for the crime is that they are dissatisfied with the

> situation. I think they are trying to show their dissatisfaction with the help of crime. To stop this, I believe that these young people should be put in a better environment. The one thing you should do, in my opinion, is to invest more money in the suburbs, as you may be able to increase the social contribution, etc. [...] Those who can do this are the government and the parliament, to come up with motions like these are probably a good idea, because one sends signals to these suburbs showing that one actually believes in them and that one is willing to put money into them. (Albert, before lesson)

6.3.2 Power analysis as a calculation of responsibility

In the responses expressing a conception of power as relevant capacity, the analyses were primarily causal, that is, characterised by identifying what caused the societal issue being discussed, identifying and comparing the relevant resources of power held by different actors, and calculating which actor(s) had the best opportunities to make a difference to the situation. The underlying causal analysis was relatively well-founded, depending on the students' knowledge of facts concerning the current issue, in this case crime in the suburbs. A great deal of space was generally devoted to investigating the causes of the riots among suburban youth. This causal analysis was used to identify what resources (measures, means of pressure, etc.) were needed to change the situation and based on this, students calculated which actors could be considered to possess these resources, and thus *who carries the most responsibility*. Connected to this, many students discussed whether actors who carry a formal responsibility for an issue, such as the police or the state, are really able to influence the issue.

6.4 Conception 4

6.4.1 Power as a potential

In the responses from this category, most students did not arrive at a calculated conclusion about who was more responsible for acting than others. Instead, the very idea of power in a complex societal issue such as the suburban riots was problematised. One student described the power relations of Swedish society as a game of snakes and ladders where “everyone has some power over everyone else, but no one has full control”. The student elaborated:

> It all goes around in a circle; your social groups can, with some informal power, control what you think and feel—if you hang out with rowdy gangs, you can yourself become rowdy and start walking around the streets and make trouble. If you hang around a bunch of super leftist hipsters, you will probably take on their ideas and opinions yourself. [...] How do you prevent something similar from happening again? There are a lot of extra factors coming in, you need information about the background of the riot, why it all escalated to the extent it did and who is actually responsible. Examples of these factors could be school,

> upbringing, cultural clashes, criminal groups, racism, mistakes or the like by the state/police, you name it. But the definitive power in these situations is the police, the one with the right to use force will always be above those who do not have that. When everything else does not work, the state will always exercise its right to whip those who do not listen/obey. Coercive power is the definitive power, the most effective power and the oldest form of power. (Benny, after lesson)

In this fourth conception of power, the power of one agent depends upon the actions of other agents, and also affects the actions of other agents. Thus, power entails the potential to change something, but power itself is also something that changes. Just as when power was conceived as a relative capacity, the responses expressing power as potential contained an analysis of what caused the situation. But the responses in this last category also developed into *a relational analysis, where the most suitable distribution of power* in different spheres was discussed.

6.4.2 Power analysis as a judgement of responsibility and proposal of measures

In the excerpt below, the relational nature of the analysis facilitated by the conception of power as a potential is exemplified by a response where a student compares the relevance of different means of power to the issue of suburban riots. From the discussion, the student infers that the resources that have been used by the state institutions so far—the police monopoly of violence and the existence of common norms and values—are no longer valid in this specific arena:

> We also have the power to influence socially as well, but since it has spread to many suburbs, the social norms there are the way they behave. I mean, in districts where this is not 'ordinary' behaviour, we have a greater power to influence such behaviour as individuals/groups, since the behaviour is looked down upon in that society. It is not acceptable and perhaps great measures are being taken here to stop the behaviour, socially that is—not at a societal level. But in these suburbs, there are so many who do it so it may have become something of a 'norm' to act in that way; you often become like those you hang out with. For it to be stopped, the police and the state must have some power, but their power has disappeared. When all state-owned companies disappear from there, it becomes more or less something like anarchy, as the state has little power over society. I read about a policeman who said that if you chase a car and it drives into one of these suburbs, stop the car chase as it is not possible for these cars to go in alone as they would be attacked. In this way, the criminals stay in power, as it is not possible for the state to control, or even show up on 'their' streets. (Anna, before lesson)

A common conclusion in these analyses was that there is a distribution of responsibility for situations like the suburban riots among all levels of society, while at the same time it

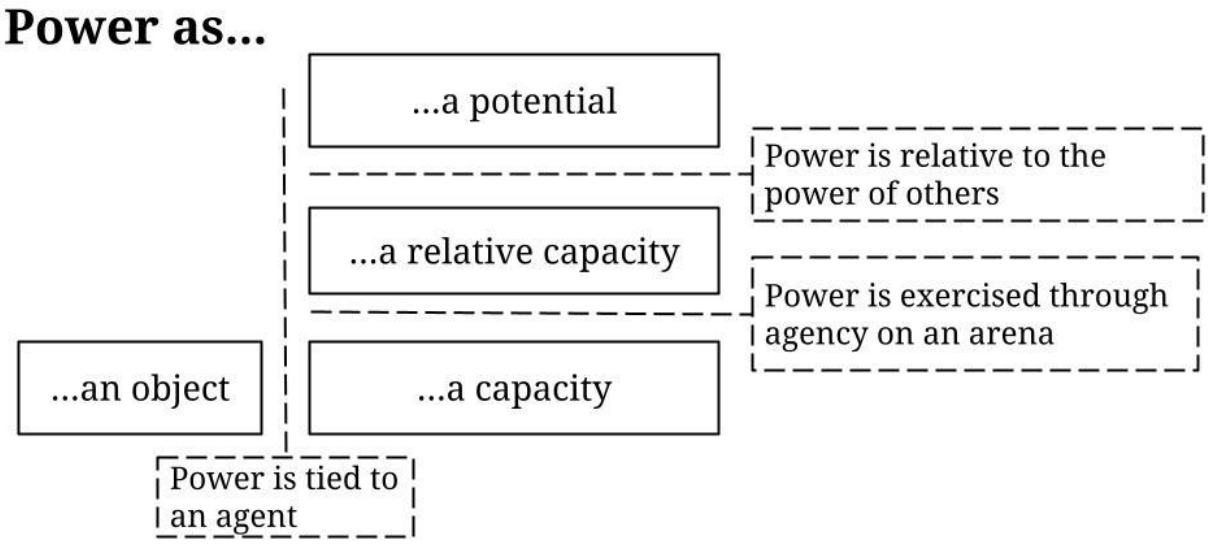
should be possible to change the balance of this power distribution through proposed measures.

7 FINDINGS II: CRITICAL ASPECTS OF UNDERSTANDING POWER AS POTENTIAL

A second finding in the analysis is the emergence of three aspects that distinguish the four conceptions in the outcome space from one another. According to variation theory (Marton, 2014), one may assume these aspects critical to be discerned by those students who expressed a conception of power that did not seem to enable them to make a qualified power analysis, that is analysing the power relations in a certain arena, considering the particular means of power.

Figure 2 shows an illustration of the outcome space of the four conceptions of power identified in the material. Separating the conceptions, illustrated with broken lines and squares, are the aspects of power that are not considered in the less complex conceptions.

Figure 2. Outcome space of the students' conceptions of power and, in squares with broken lines, the aspects of power separating the conceptions from one another



7.1 Power is tied to an agent

The first conception of power can be described as horizontal relative to the other conceptions; the idea of power as an abstract object with an agency of its own is not included in, but separate to, the idea of power as a capacity. What is not considered in the reasoning based on the conception of power as an object, is *agency*—the aspect highlighted by Morris (2012), Dowding (2008) and Pansardi (2012a, 2012b), where power is tied to an agent who is the possessor of the power resources. This aspect is crucial to the more

complex conceptions of power in the outcome space in Figure 2, and to the kind of power analyses that these conceptions afford.

7.2 Power is exercised through agency on an arena

The last three conceptions of power are hierarchically organised, which means that the lower categories are included in the higher ones. The idea of power as a capacity tied to an agent is included in the idea of power as a relative capacity, which in turn is included in the idea of power as potential. What distinguishes conception 3 (power as relative capacity) from conception 2 (power as capacity), is the discernment of power as exercised through agency on an *arena*—which means that not all power resources are relevant to that arena. The distinction between power to and power over suggested by Dowding, focuses on this distribution of *relevant* power resources.

7.3 Power is relative to the power of others

The aspect of power separating conception 4 (power as a potential) from the other conceptions, is the interpersonal *relativity* of power. It is not only possible to compare the power of a certain actor to that held by others relative to the specific arena, but the power of an actor is also constantly affected by and affecting the power of other agents. When students perceive the idea of power in this way, it seems to afford them a focus on the interplay between the actions of different power agents, and on how a complex societal issue could be addressed in a proactive as well as a reactive way. This aspect can be compared to Pansardi's view that power is always social power, that is, power always describes social relations.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The concept of power has been debated in philosophy and political and social science literature since before the very idea of a system for democratic mass education of citizens. Consequently, power analysis is an essential part of SSE, both for the purpose of students' qualification and their subjectification. From our findings, we conclude that the students in our study often seem to have a tough time conceiving power as the potential of an agent, and as dependent on means of agency, arena and the actions of other agents. We also conclude that this impedes their ability to analyse societal issues of power in a qualified way.

8.1 Subjectification and empowerment through analysis of power

One reason for teaching students how to conduct qualified power analyses is that it contributes to subjectification through critical discourse. This study is limited to exploring expressions of students' conceptions of power and corresponding ways of analysing power issues in written essays; additional or differing results might have been found in other material, such as recorded discussions. Also, other ways of understanding power

might have been prompted had the students been given another assignment (c.f. Marton & Pong, 2005). Nevertheless, the results suggest that contextual knowledge of the specific power arenas and issues discussed—such as knowledge of how our political, economic, social, legal and media systems actually work and how they affect each other—was important for the students' analytical reasoning about power issues. This finding is in accordance with the model of civic reasoning (Tväråna, 2019). Clearly, an analysis of power issues entails something other than the kind of causal analysis focusing on chains of cause and consequence that are commonly understood to be equivalent to analysis in Swedish SSE. Power analysis should rather be understood as an example of the third level of analysis (critical analysis) in the model (see Table 1). Power is, of course, a concept central to a theory which explains relations between individuals, and is thus part of the second level of analysis (causal analysis), but when understood as a potential, power also affords a critical judgement of responsibility and a proposal of measures. This means that different perspectives on a societal issue of power can be critically examined, making an informed position-taking possible. In the student texts expressing power as a potential, dimensions of agency, intentionality and discourse were often prominent, as well as dimensions of distribution of resources. One example comes from an essay written after the lesson by Carla, whose essay before the lesson was categorised as an example of describing power as a constant capacity (see 6.2.1 above):

> The roots of social unrest may lie in a shift in the balance of power in society, that some groups, people, have more power than others. The basis for this is often the norms and the expectations that society has of individuals, as well as those that individuals have of each other. [...] It is norms that govern how we humans think and feel. This happens through norms and structures shaping us with ideas and thoughts, and ultimately perhaps shaping whole societies. [...] Individuals have opinions, characteristics, knowledge and thoughts which constitute informal personal power, several individuals with similar opinions and thoughts, etc., create stronger groups which in turn have the power to influence others. This can be through, for example, the media spreading their messages, thoughts, opinions, knowledge, characteristics, to others, and thus influencing them as well. As the group of like-minded people grows, norms and structures emerge that reach other people and societies. (Carla, after lesson)

The results presented in this article suggest that understanding power as an individual's potential to act, based on social interactions, is closely related to their discernment of their own and others' agency and resources relative to those of other members of society. In order for power analysis to become a tool for critical judgement, and to develop the active, justice-oriented citizen that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) visualise as a goal for citizenship education, the power analyses students are supposed to conduct need to go beyond describing a condition or an individual capacity of an agent, and also entail more than a calculation of what agent holds most of the means of power relevant to the arena

at hand. In doing so, the power analysis aligns less with earlier definitions of power, focusing solely on relational distribution of means of power (c.f. Dahl, 1957; Dowding, 2008), and more with Pansardi's (2012a) definition of power, but it also relates to Arendt's (1969) idea of power as communication. The results support the idea that being able to reason analytically includes the development of a critical judgement as a citizen—that is, being able to take a stand and act in relation to various issues and problems. Arendt (1961) describes judgement as intertwined with acting, and with agency. This is in line with the goal of civic and citizenship education to develop critical citizens with the ability to independently take a stand on political issues. Such a critical judgement does not include only one's own opinions but is related to civic participation and based on (political) values being weighed together with logical argumentation and domain-specific knowledge (Manzel, 2016).

8.2 Implications for teaching and further research

In the analysis of these student answers, it was clear that many students lacked sufficient background information on the issue they had chosen, and that they therefore were often not able to make a more in-depth analysis of the power relations relevant to the societal issue discussed. A possible explanation for why this way of reasoning about power appeared is the way 'power' as a concept is used in everyday political discourse and public debate, where people in power are sometimes referred to as 'the power'. When the materialist foundations of power—people, their actions and their means of action—are not made visible to students, there is a risk that the idea of 'power' as something that is exercised by agents remains unclear to them. It is crucial that teachers understand that this aspect of power may be undiscerned by students, even as mature as those in upper secondary school, since this seems to hinder a power analysis that goes beyond describing power relations as a condition, and enables a discussion of how current power relations might be changed or reinforced.

From our results, it seems that it is only when students perceive power as a potential, thus discerning the aspects of agency, the importance of a contextual power arena, and other power agents in the same arena, that it is possible for them to go beyond describing an essentialist idea of power and responsibility, and instead make a critical judgement of both responsibilities and possible measures for change. The findings imply that what teaching should focus on is the presence (and type) of power actors, including institutional and societal structures, the specific context of the arena and the issue at hand, and the relationship between different actors in the arena.

The model of power used in the lessons only focused on some of the aspects identified as critical for students to discern. An explanation for this may be the lack of theoretical perspectives on power included in SSE teacher education and textbooks in Sweden. What the model did not focus on was the current arena, which resulted in the current means of power and their distribution not being particularly focused upon. The model also did not specifically highlight who was affected in the power relationship. Thus, the critical aspects

identified could be used for improving teaching designs that in a more efficient way promote the development of students' ability to analyse issues of power, by taking other theories of power into account. Further studies testing this hypothesis would be welcomed.

In the lessons, the importance of the 'agency on an arena' aspect of power could be noticed in relation to the specific arenas chosen by the teachers as context for the issues of power discussed. At first, the teachers chose arenas they thought would be specifically familiar to and engaging for the students. But being emotionally engaged with an issue was not enough for students to make a qualitative analysis. The arenas used in the tasks were football hooliganism, sexual harassment, integration issues, and online harassment. Although these societal issues were emotionally engaging, students were required to have access to facts about the issue at hand in order to make a qualified analysis. Thus, we suggest that necessary attention is given to contextual information on the societal issues discussed when teaching students to analyse power relations, but also that knowledge of critical aspects of power as a potential, as well as knowledge of contemporary and classic power theory, are included in education for upper secondary SSE teachers.

Further research is needed to investigate how the idea of power is treated both in teacher education and in teaching material. A greater awareness of the critical aspects of power identified and presented in this study could possibly support teachers in designing teaching units that efficiently develop students' abilities to analyse power relations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We like to thank social science teachers Krister Brolin, Karina Cottin, Marie Waern and Anna-Karin Martinsson without whom the project would not have been possible. The project was financed by Stockholm Teaching and Learning Studies.

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