

Power in *The Wire*: A Typical Depiction?

Victoria Donnelly

Abstract

This essay focuses on the depiction of power in the fictional crime drama TV series, *The Wire*. The theories of Michel Foucault are drawn upon in order to explore the complexities of institutional power. Those theories are then used to analyze the portrayal of the effect of institutional power on a street character and an official character from the show. The claim is made that the depiction of the street characters as being unable to change their position of power within any institution is indicative of a stereotypical portrayal of these characters in the show. This analysis is useful for gaining a better understanding of the way power is depicted in fictional television shows and specifically how institutional power functions. The scope of this analysis is limited to only the first season of the show and only to two characters.

Making robberies into larcenies. Making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and majors become colonels. I've been here before.

- Detective Roland 'Prez' Pryzbylewski

They want me to stand with them, right? But where the fuck they at when they supposed to be standing by us? I mean, when shit goes bad and there's hell to pay, where they at? This game is rigged, man. We like the little bitches on a chessboard.

-Preston 'Bodie' Broadus

These quotes are from HBO's crime drama television series *The Wire*, created by David Simon. Each is indicative of the power struggles that are portrayed in the series. Detective Pryzbylewski understands that the only way to gain a higher position of power within the police department is to appear to be performing well, even if that means being dishonest. Preston Broadus reflects on his inability to progress in the illegal drug trade despite his loyalty to his superiors. Despite belonging to different and even opposing institutions, both characters are portrayed as confined in power under their respective institution. However, Pryzbylewski can see a way of gaining more power within his institution, while Broadus cannot.

Introduction

Despite its classification as a crime drama, Kinder (2008) argues that *The Wire* is much more complex than other series that fit this category, such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. What is unique about *The Wire* is its systemic analysis of the city of Baltimore, Maryland, and the different institutions that operate within it. This focus on institutional power is evident because each of the five seasons focuses on a specific institution: the illegal drug trade, the seaport system, the city government and bureaucracy, the education system, and the print media. Instead of neatly wrapping up a murder case in each sixty-minute episode, as is the case with *CSI* episodes, creator David Simon seeks to depict the reality of crime, drugs, and murder in a way that provides a deeper analysis of the institutions that operate within Baltimore. Unlike *CSI*, which “never illuminates its urban context,” *The Wire* centers on the city context, and specifically on the institutions that serve Baltimore (Kinder, 2008, p.50).

It is this deeper focus that has garnered critical acclaim for the series, despite low viewership. According to Schaub (2010), only 1.1 million people watched the series finale of *The Wire*, “despite its reputation as ‘the best TV show ever broadcast in America’” (p. 122). *CSI*, on the other hand, was considered “the most popular crime series currently on TV” when it ended (Kinder, 2008, p. 50). The disconnect between reviews of the show and viewership is one interesting facet of *The Wire*. Despite being considered more in-depth and realistic than *CSI*, *The Wire* has never been as successful.

The Wire is also very different from *CSI* and other crime dramas because the main characters do not only belong to law enforcement. Rowe and Collins (2009) state that *The Wire* “gives equal attention to the people who live on the edges of the system, in this case poor inner-city residents” (p. 182). Instead of showing only the work of the police force in solving a murder, the viewers often see a murder planned and executed by the street characters long before the police learn of it.

Therefore, the show focuses on two separate sets of characters, which for the purpose of this discussion will be referred to as the official characters and the street characters. The official characters in *The Wire* are tied to the many different bureaucratic institutions, but the focus of this paper will be on the officers of the Baltimore Police Department. The police characters operate under the influence of the law enforcement hierarchy. The street characters are tied to the drug trade, and operate specifically under the drug empire of Avon Barksdale.

In this discussion I aim to analyze the way that the power of institutions influences both the street characters and the official characters. After providing a definition of power, I will analyze the street characters and the official characters to see if Foucault’s ideas about power hold true in *The Wire*’s depiction of institutional power. I argue that the street and official characters are both constrained by webs of power within their respective institutions, but that those in the police department are able to change their position of power as Foucault describes, whereas those in the street are not.

Definitions of Power

A common definition of power is the possession of control, authority, or influence over others. Typically, people interpret this meaning in the context of one person exerting power over another, the way a mother exerts power over her child. This is valid, because a mother presumably has control, authority and influence over her child. However, power can become much more complex than this linear view when considered in the context of institutions.

The works of the French philosopher Michel Foucault offer a very different view of power than this common definition. Foucault created the concept of “governmentality,” which according to Collins and Rowe (2009), essentially means that democracies have managed to systematically control every aspect of the lives of their citizens. This is considered a “more thorough and complex version” of his theories related to the power and control in the panopticon (Collins & Rowe, 2009, p. 183).

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault (1978) elaborates on institutional power, saying that “power is everywhere... because it comes from everywhere” (p. 92). According to Foucault (1978), institutional power is not exerted in a top down fashion as with the mother and child. Instead, power spreads in a web, where everyone has access to some power, even those who are oppressed. Because power is being exerted from all sides, not just from the top down, everyone has access to power and everyone is subject to power. Foucault (1978) also states that “where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 92). Just as there is no one source of power, there is no one source of rebellion either. Foucault (1978) therefore argues that there is opportunity for everyone, even the oppressed groups, to change their position of power within the web, since everyone has some access to power and resistance.

Foucault’s theories about governmentality and power are directly applicable to *The Wire* because of its depiction of the different institutions that exert power over the citizens of Baltimore. Rowe and Collins (2009) explain: “the drama provides a fictional view of how various official levers of control— police, judges, and politicians—exert power over the area that they are positioned to govern” (p. 182). There are therefore many depictions of governmental power within the show to analyze using Foucault’s definition of power. As previously mentioned, *The Wire* also gives equal attention to the street characters, which provides the opportunity to analyze the drug empire as well.

Methods & Materials

For this discussion on the power of institutions in *The Wire*, I will focus on the first season, about the illegal drug trade, because it gives the most attention to these two institutions. I watched all thirteen episode of the first season in order to analyze the depiction of power in this show. I did not choose specific episodes from the first season to analyze, because not all characters are present in every episode. I instead chose one character from the streets and one character from the police force to focus on.

I chose characters for analysis based on their visibility throughout the season and their position of power at the beginning of the season. I chose characters that are present in the entire first season,

ruling out ones who died part of the way through. Also, because this analysis will include the character's ability to change their position of power, I chose to focus on characters who are at a lower level of power within their specific institution. That way, both characters could potentially improve their position of power. I also believe that these characters are more likely than characters of higher rank to be constrained by the power structure of their institution.

In order to apply Foucault's theories of power, I will analyze the street character and the police character using these specific aspects of institutional power: (1) access to power, (2) ability to resist power, and (3) ability to change position of power.

Power on the Streets

In order to discuss the nature of power among the street characters, this section will focus on one particular street character named Bodie. At the beginning of season one, Bodie is sixteen and is one of many young dealers selling drugs under the Barksdale organization in the low-rise housing projects they refer to as "The Pit." Bodie emerges as one of three main drug dealers working under D'Angelo Barksdale's wing, along with his companions, Wallace and Poot. Bodie lives in The Pit with his grandmother because his mother died from a heroin overdose when he was young, and he has no father. Bodie is characterized as possessing an angry, violent temper and as often making decisions too quickly. It is this temperament that causes him to have many run-ins with various members of the police force, whom he always meets with resentment and resistance.

Access to power

Bodie is constrained by the official characters in the way described by Foucault's ideas of governmentality. The government forces, including law enforcement, have found a way to control every aspect of Bodie's life. He has no access to basic needs such as food, water, shelter, and safety. His family lives in a poor, rundown neighborhood, and the government has not done anything to help him or any of the other street characters. Because the government controls the means he needs to survive, Bodie has nothing. He has no job or education, and therefore has no legal way to make money.

Therefore, Bodie becomes a part of the drug empire as a way of gaining power over his own life in a way that the government has not allowed. Collins and Rowe (2009) explain that the street characters have "little or no access to the established levers of power... and they respond by creating their own system of governance that earns them power and creates its own system of control" (p. 182). The drug trade allows Bodie the opportunity to have access to power by providing him with the things he could not get from "official" society. Most importantly, through the drug organization, Bodie has access to money, which he cannot get through bureaucracy. This is his most important leverage of power, and because he cannot get it in a legal way, he finds that power in the drug organization.

But changing from one institution to another does not give Bodie complete freedom to exert his power. While it allows him access to power previously denied to him, the drug trade also creates

new sets of limitations on his ability to exert power. The Barksdale organization has many rules that dealers have to follow, which are limiting to Bodie in many instances. One rule is that no one who is dealing is allowed to use the product. Also, there are strict rules about pager and pay phone use. No dealer is allowed to have or use a cell phone. Bodie expresses his discontent with this rule on several occasions, because he has to walk to the payphone to make calls, even in emergencies,.

In summary, while Bodie does not have access to power in official society, he does find access to power in the drug organization. However, both institutions present their own limitations to Bodie's ability to access power.

Ability to resist power

A sharp contrast is made early on in the first season between quick-tempered, violent Bodie and his softer, pensive overseer, D'Angelo. While Bodie may not be in a high position within the drug empire, he does have the ability to exercise resistance against his overseer. Bodie resists D'Angelo's orders on several occasions. For example, in episode one, "The Target," D'Angelo tells Bodie that he is not treating the customers correctly (Simon & Burns, 2002). D'Angelo believes that the dealers should treat their buyers with respect, just as if they were selling any other product. Bodie openly disagrees with D'Angelo, not only in words but also in actions. After an argument with D'Angelo over the topic, Bodie continues to treat customers as below him, going so far as to severely beat a customer to defy D'Angelo.

Ability to change position

During the first season of *The Wire*, Bodie does not change his position of power within the Barksdale organization. Bodie remains a low-level drug dealer in The Pit, never advancing even to become a dealer in the high-rise apartments referred to as "The Towers." In episode thirteen, "Sentencing," D'Angelo is sentenced to twenty years of prison and the kingpin, Avon Barksdale, is imprisoned along with many other higher-ranking members (Simon & Burns, 2002). Things go into disarray for the entire organization. But Bodie is not appointed to a higher position of power within The Pit to replace D'Angelo or within the organization's higher ranks to replace those who were imprisoned. None of the young dealers in The Pit experience any change in position within the drug empire during the first season.

The same is true for Bodie's position within the official society of Baltimore. He is never able to make enough money to improve his life situation. He does not get out of "the game," he does not try to move, and he never goes to school. Therefore, as far as his position of power within official society, he is still powerless. Without money, a legal job, or an education, he is considered to be in a very low position in society. Bodie is also continuously arrested for various charges related to distribution or violence. With legal charges brought against him, he may even be at a lower position of power in society by the end of the first season.

Although he is given several opportunities where he could change his position within official society, his decisions ultimately prevent him from making any change. In episode four, "Old Cases," two police officers, Detectives Herc and Carver, pick up Bodie on a distribution charge (Simon & Burns, 2002). They take him in for questioning, hoping that he will offer some inside

information about the Barksdale organization in exchange for them dropping the charges. This is Bodie's opportunity to walk away free of charges, but he instead maintains his loyalty to the Barksdale organization and does not give up any information. Herc and Carver later take him to a Maryland Juvenile Detention Facility, where he is supposed to remain for a short sentence and rehabilitation. Again, this could have been a chance for Bodie to get out of his current way of life, but he quickly escapes during his first day there, stealing a car and returning to his life in Baltimore.

It is clear through this analysis that despite access to power and ability to resist power, Bodie is not able to change his position of power within the drug empire or within the official society because of his own decisions and because of the constraining nature of the two institutions.

Power in the Police Force

For the discussion on the power of official characters, I will focus on the main police character for season one, Jimmy McNulty. McNulty is the first character introduced in *The Wire*, beginning with the first scene of the first episode. At the beginning of the season, he is a detective for Baltimore City Homicide with his partner, Bunk Moreland. He operates under a long chain of command, including his immediate boss, Major Rawls, with whom he has a tense relationship. McNulty is talented and dedicated to his work and usually does his job morally and without corruption, which is what gains him the title of "good police." But his devotion often causes him to work at the expense of his fellow detectives and to cross his commanding officers in order to get what he wants. McNulty's perseverance and interest is what creates the police detail dedicated to investigating the Barksdale organization.

Access to power

From the very beginning of season one, tension is established between McNulty and his superiors. As a former patrolman for the Western District, McNulty is knowledgeable about the neighborhood, its inhabitants, and therefore, the Barksdale organization. He becomes frustrated with the fact that nothing is being done to try to bring down the huge drug empire, as the police department is instead focusing on cases it can solve, mostly buy-busts. The police force is aware that because kingpins and other high-ranking members never touch drugs or money, they will be hard to catch, and therefore they are left alone. McNulty feels strongly that something should be done about the organization, and therefore takes it into his own hands to create more attention for his cause. McNulty uses power available to him, through the web of power he operates within, in order to successfully create an entire detail unit dedicated to the Barksdale organization. In episode one, during a court case in which D'Angelo Barksdale is being tried for murder, McNulty notices many high-ranking drug dealers in the courtroom, who scare a witness out of testifying (Simon & Burns, 2002). McNulty decides to bring this matter up with the presiding judge, with whom he appears to already have a relationship. It is this judge, outraged by what happened in his court, who publicly speaks out about the Barksdale organization, sparking media coverage of the story about the lack of police intervention. It is through the power of this judge that McNulty is able to get what he wants. The police are forced to respond to the negative media coverage by creating a task force of investigators (including McNulty) to bring down the Barksdale organization.

It is important to note here that while McNulty does have access to power within the police force, most of his power is secondhand. McNulty repeatedly goes through other powerful characters to accomplish his goals. While he has access to power, that power is not necessarily his.

Ability to resist power

McNulty's resistance to power within the police force is best described as passive. He does not disobey his superiors in an outright manner in the same way that Bodie does with D'Angelo. When McNulty is trying to reach a goal but is constrained by the orders of a superior, he often goes above that superior's head to someone with even more power in order to get what he wants. In episode thirteen, McNulty refuses to allow his superiors to shut down the detail after uncovering political corruption related to drug money and the Barksdale organization (Simon & Burns, 2002). He takes the case to the FBI in hopes that they will further explore the corruption, completely ignoring orders and attempting to resist the power of his superiors.

Ability to change position

McNulty changes his position of power within the police force several times. Throughout the season it is made clear that years before, McNulty had been a patrol officer on the streets in the Western district, and this is why he knows the Barksdale crew so well. The Western district is a very poor area in Baltimore, and this is where the Barksdale organization operates its drug empire. While still a patrolman, McNulty helps a homicide detective to solve a murder, which gets him promoted to a detective in the homicide unit. In this case, McNulty was clearly able to gain more power within the law enforcement institution.

But there are also instances in which McNulty lowers his position of power. In episode one, when Major Rawls finds out that McNulty is the one who went behind his back and talked to the judge, he makes sure that McNulty is kicked out of his homicide unit and is assigned to the detail investigating the Barksdale case (Simon & Burns, 2002). While this assignment is what McNulty ultimately wanted, everyone in the police force considered it a lower position of power because the people who were assigned to the detail are basically "rejects" from other units.

In the first season, it is made clear that McNulty has the ability to change his position to both increase and decrease his power within the police force.

Conclusion

After analyzing one street character and one official character using Foucault's theories of power, I have noticed several important aspects about institutional power in *The Wire*. First, both the street characters and the official characters are greatly constrained by institutions. Throughout the season, both characters face obstacles to their goals, which are created by the institutions they belong to. However, the street characters are constrained not only by the drug organization, but also by official institutions. Since the drug dealers live in almost two worlds (their illegal world and the legal world outside of it), it makes sense that they experience two levels of constraint. This

aspect is an important expansion on Foucault's idea of governmentality. The reality for the street characters is that they are not only constrained by the official institutions, such as the government, but also by their own institutions. The Barksdale organization also has complete control over their lives, in addition to the government.

Another important result of the analysis is that both the street characters and the official characters have access to power in some way. This is congruent with Foucault's ideas that everyone has access because power is a web structure. A distinction can be made, however, because the street characters in *The Wire* seem only to have access to power within the drug organization, not within the official institutions. The reason why the drug organization exists is to fill the need for power that the street characters did not have in the official institutions. Also, the official character's access to power seems to be more secondhand than that of the street characters. The official characters access power through other people within their institution. For the official characters, access to power seems to be about who they know, while for the street characters it is more about what they have.

Also in agreement with Foucault's ideas is the finding that both the street characters and the official characters have the ability to resist power in *The Wire*. It makes sense from Foucault's theories that if both of the characters have access to power then they should have the ability to resist power as well.

The major difference is that the official characters are able to change their position of power while the street characters cannot. Bodie is not able to change his position of power, which is representative of all of the other street characters who experience the same situation. McNulty, on the other hand, like the other official characters, is able to change his position of power for better or for worse throughout the first season. I attribute this difference as either a counter to Foucault's theories about power or as a stereotypical portrayal of the street characters.

It is possible that Foucault's theories about power do not hold true for every institution. In this case, it is probable that Foucault's theories apply accurately to the official institution but not to the drug organization. On the other hand, Foucault's ideas may apply to the real-life institutions that *The Wire* portrays, but the fictionalized version could be unrealistic. In other words, David Simon may portray the street characters in a stereotypical way that makes them seem more powerless than they really are. Some authors have already studied the possibility of *The Wire* portraying stereotypes that most viewers believe the show to be free of.

Rowe and Collins (2009) studied the depiction of power in *The Wire* with a different aim. The authors analyze the way that individual characters exert power in order to better understand how the official and the street institutions use power differently. First, the types of power stereotypically used by each group in most crime dramas (like *CSI*) were identified. For example, the official group stereotypically uses law as their form of power, and the street group uses force. After studying the first season of *The Wire*, the authors concluded that the official characters used law most often, and the street group most often used force as their source of power. Therefore, the authors concluded that while *The Wire* is different from other crime dramas, it does perpetuate some of the stereotypical uses of power used in other shows like *CSI*.

I believe that there is valid evidence from my own analysis of *The Wire* and other studies that power is portrayed in a stereotypical way in this show. In particular, the street character's ability to change their position of power seems to be the aspect that is portrayed stereotypically. Perhaps it is due to Simon's desire to "dramatize the dire need for policy reform" in Baltimore (Kinder, 2008, p. 50). It was Simon's goal to create a systemic analysis of Baltimore so that the public could understand how horrifying inner city life is. It is possible that to this extent he dramatized the street character's plights beyond reality. I believe that further study into the depiction of power in *The Wire*, encompassing more characters and more seasons, could reveal further information about whether or not *The Wire* stereotypically portrays power in similar ways to other crime dramas.

References

- Collins, M., & Rowe, D. (2009). Power *Wire*: Understanding the depiction of power in TV drama. *Journal of the Institute of Justice & International Studies*, 9, 182-192. Retrieved from: <http://www.ucmo.edu/cjinst/Journal.html>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality* (R. Hurley, Trans., Vol. 1). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Kinder, M. (2008). Re-wiring Baltimore: The emotive power of systemics, seriality, and the city. *Film Quarterly*, 62(2), 50-57. doi:10.1525/FQ.2008.62.2.50
- Simon, D. & Burns, E. (Writers), & Johnson, C. (Director). (2002). The Target [Television series episode]. In D. Simon & R. F. Colesberry (Executive Producers), *The Wire*. Baltimore, MD: HBO.
- Simon, D. & Burns, E. (Writers), & Patten, T. V. (Director). (2002). Sentencing [Television series episode]. In D. Simon & R. F. Colesberry (Executive Producers), *The Wire*. Baltimore, MD: HBO.
- Simon, D. & Burns, E. (Writers), & Virgo, C. (Director). (2002). Old Cases [Television series episode]. In D. Simon & R. F. Colesberry (Executive Producers), *The Wire*. Baltimore, MD: HBO.
- Schaub, J. (2010). *The Wire*: Big brother is not watching you in body-more, murderland. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38(3), 122-132. Retrieved from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vjpf20#.UwGtYmRDuQM>