Power

Sociology

Power is a fundamental sociological concept, affecting every level of society and influencing our daily lives in countless ways. Because power pervades social life, to understand how society works we must consider its role in various social contexts. As noted political philosopher and social critic Bertrand Russell (1938/2004, 4) put it, " the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same way in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics. " Power, like energy, takes many forms and is essential in understanding why things happen as they do in society.

The amount of power that we have heavily influences what we can accomplish in life, whether at home, at work, or in our community. People with more resources typically have more power, and those with power can use it to obtain more resources. Power, therefore, is closely linked to social inequality, another fundamental feature of society. Inequality can be based on many different characteristics, including class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. But these different forms of inequality have something in common: power and its influence.

The word power is derived from a Latin word, potere, which means " to be able. " Max Weber viewed power as the ability to bring about an intended outcome, even when opposed by others. Two key components of this definition are the basis for an important distinction: Some sociologists focus on the " ability to bring about an intended outcome," or the " power to" approach, so called because it highlights the capacity to accomplish something. Others focus on the ability to overcome opposition, or the " power over" approach, so called because it highlights the capacity to dominate others.

These two aspects of power are not mutually exclusive, and feminist scholars, especially, have worked to integrate both approaches into a comprehensive analysis of power. Empowerment, which increases people's capacity to bring about an intended outcome, is the focus of much feminist scholarship on power. Social philosopher Virginia Held, for example, argues that power is the capacity to change and empower oneself and others. According to political scientist Nancy Hartsock , the " feminist theory of power" views power as a competence and ability, rather than a form of dominance.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) highlights the use of power to resist oppression. People often discuss power and empowerment in terms of individual effort and achievement. If your goal is to find an interesting, decent-paying job, then acquiring appropriate education and experience can help give you the " power to" accomplish your objective. Empowerment often involves individual enhancement and self-improvement. Individual self-empowerment is the theme of popular self-help books with titles such as Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life as You Want It.

Feminist theories point out that power can involve competence and empowerment, rather than just the domination of others. Have you experienced empowerment in your own life in some way without diminishing the power of others? Empowerment can also involve organizations, communities, and entire categories of people. International development agencies, for example, try to empower poor people by increasing their capacity to care for themselves and their families. The " power to" approach

can also apply to social systems such as schools, governments, or even entire societies.

American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1960) saw power as the capacity of a social system to achieve collective goals. In the tradition of structural functionalism, Parsons was most interested in the overall operation of societies as social systems. According to his framework, a society is powerful to the extent that it can accomplish its goals. Wealthy societies have more resources—and thus are more powerful—than poorer societies (one way that power and inequality are often connected).

Powerful societies can maintain a high standard of living for their citizens, ensure self-defense, advance scientific and technological frontiers, and achieve other collective goals. By all these measures, the United States and other wealthy nations are powerful societies, whereas impoverished countries are much less powerful. Functionalist theories of power focus on the capacity of social systems to achieve collective goals. What is an example of a social system that you are a part of, and what collective goals does it attempt to achieve? Education is probably the best-known approach to empowerment.

Some teaching philosophies, for example, focus heavily on empowering students rather than simply transmitting facts. Organization involves bringing people together to identify common goals and work to achieve them. Smoothly operating workplaces are well organized, for example, with employees and management cooperating to achieve organizational goals. Networking involves reaching outside your immediate circle of contacts to find allies. Professional associations in many fields hold conferences and

social events to facilitate networking to search for employment or to advance careers.

The effort to accomplish something meets opposition and produces conflict. That's why the second part of our definition of power includes the idea of conflict: " the ability to bring about an intended outcome, even when opposed by others. " This emphasis is called the " power over" approach, since it focuses on overcoming opposition or dominating others. In one classic definition from political scientist Robert Dahl (1957), power is seen exclusively in terms of domination: " A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (p. 202).

The most obvious use of power as a means of domination is in political and economic conflicts, as powerful elites attempt to maintain their advantages over others. To persuade is to get people's compliance by convincing them of the correctness of your position and goals. An organization dedicated to combating sexually transmitted diseases, for example, might launch a campaign to educate people about the importance of condoms. A second strategy to overcome opposition is to offer a reward.

To reward is to encourage people's compliance by offering a positive incentive. Rewarding a child with words of praise, an athlete with a trophy, or a country with economic or military assistance are all ways to encourage or reinforce desirable behavior. To coerce is to force compliance by threatening, intimidating, pressuring, or harming someone. Drivers generally obey the speed limit (or something close to it) because they know a speeding ticket can be very expensive. Therefore, the threat of possible punishment has a coercive effect on their behavior.

Sociologists and social psychologists have done a great deal of research on the dynamics of small groups, including those associated with power. Researchers have shown that when authorities rely on reward or coercive power, their influence weakens if the amount of resources they control is reduced. However, authorities who have earned respect and are seen as legitimate enjoy group members' loyalty regardless of their ability to reward or coerce. Such loyalty can evaporate, however, if the person in authority acts in ways that group members consider unfair, unethical, or disrespectful.

Compared to powerful people, those who feel relatively powerless are more likely to use coercion, because they think they have no other means of achieving their aims. Some parents and teachers feel relatively powerless when children seem out of control. These adults are more likely to use coercive threats and punishment than are parents and teachers who feel empowered. Power tactics are the specific strategies people use to influence others in everyday life. These familiar strategies involve power, though we often do not think of them in those terms. Power tactics vary along three key dimensions: Hard and soft.

Hard tactics are forceful, direct, or harsh. People employing them use economic rewards and other tangible outcomes, and even threats. Rational and nonrational. Rational tactics appeal to logic and include bargaining and rational persuasion. Many newspaper editorials use rational tactics. Nonrational tactics include emotional appeals, such as when television commercials imply that driving a particular type of car will make you sexy. Unilateral and bilateral. Unilateral tactics do not require cooperation to initiate; they include demands, orders, or disengagement.

Military leaders employ unilateral tactics when they issue orders. Bilateral tactics involve give-and-take, as in negotiations and discussions. In Discipline and Punish (1975/1995) Foucault explained how modern prisons emerged in the eighteenth century as a humane way of treating criminals, rather than torturing or killing them. Advocates of prison reform argued they would deter crime by more effectively controlling criminals. Foucault's study of prisons made use of his unique view of power, which has influenced many scholars.

Foucault argued that although power can be oppressive and dominating, it can also have a positive effect. He wrote, " We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ' excludes,' it ' represses,' it ' censors,' it ' abstracts,' it ' masks,' it ' conceals. ' In fact power produces; it produces reality …" Foucault coined the term power/knowledge to show that how we understand and interpret the world both enlightens and restricts us. That's because systems of knowledge order, rank, and make visible various aspects of the world, enabling it to be controlled more effectively.

When applied to people, such systems of knowledge serve as mechanisms of social control. Within any group or society, power determines who will receive important resources and how those resources will be used. Governments at all levels have the power to allocate resources, generating revenue by collecting taxes and fees and then distributing that money through public projects, social programs, military spending, and other policies. Within particular agencies or departments, officials wield power by exercising control over budgets and supplies.

Power can also be used for political purposes, enabling some people to set the conditions under which others are expected to live. Politicians and government officials pass laws and establish regulations that organize many aspects of our daily lives. Those with power set the rules, and those without power are expected to follow them. By selecting certain news stories and sources, the news media teach us to view certain topics and people as important and worthy of consideration (local crime stories or celebrities), while marginalizing or ignoring others who are not given routine coverage (advocates for the poor).

Influencing the stories people read, the ideas they consider, and the perspectives to which they are regularly exposed is one way of exercising power in a society. Italian Marxist activist-scholar Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) argued that the class in power maintains its dominance not simply through the use of force, which is the job of the state's police and military forces, but also through the manipulation of ideas, which it accomplishes primarily through its control of cultural institutions such as the mass media, research and policy institutes (" think-tanks"), and universities.

Gramsci (1929–1935/1971) applied the word hegemony to this situation. Hegemony exists when those in power have successfully spread their ideas—and marginalized alternative viewpoints—so that their perspectives and interests are accepted widely as being universal and true. Systems of social inequality are also reinforced by a justifying ideology that oppressed people themselves sometimes internalize.

Cultural norms, the legal system, schools, the media, and other social institutions may all play a role in creating and maintaining this ideology.

Economic, political, and cultural powers are based in real-world social institutions, including businesses, government, and religions. At different points in history, each of these has been more influential than the other two. In the West, the power of religious institutions was most important in shaping daily life in the medieval period.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rise of the secular nation-state signaled the growing influence of military and political power. In recent decades, economic power, in the form of transnational corporations, has become the most influential, in many cases eclipsing the influence of government. Legitimate power is voluntarily accepted by those who are affected. Weber's idea of legitimate power is sometimes translated as " authority. "