

RELATIONS: POWER AND MUTUALITY - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

The moment we enter the interpersonal domain, even before we start speaking with others, we unconsciously evaluate the person with whom we are dealing with and consider what is the best way to approach the encounter. Our interactions with others will largely depend on the nature of our relation and on power dynamics; some biologists even argue there is an unconscious dominance hierarchy when two individuals meet that is a result of millions of years of evolution. Most of us don't like to think about "power" (much less about dominance hierarchies) and often attribute a negative connotation to this term. However, whether we like it or not, power and influence are at the heart of all our interactions, especially in the context of leadership work. Taking the time to consider the implicit power dynamics in the relations we have will help us better understand ourselves and others and interact in more mutual ways.

MAIN IDEAS

In every interpersonal setting, the nature of the relations we have with other people will affect how we proceed in our interactions. For example, we are likely to deal differently with a friend or family member than with our boss, based on a set of implicit assumptions that we make about the interaction.

In fact, each of our relationships is quickly evaluated in an unconscious manner by answering questions like:

- **Who is involved in the interaction?** Is it a friend, a boss, an acquaintance...?
- **What are their general attributes?** Any temperament or disposition that I know of? Any specific interests? What do their behaviours reveal about them? Do I know of any particular feeling or belief they may hold about me? What position and role do they hold? How may their physique or age impact our potential relationship?
- **Is our relation formal or informal?** Work and professional, or familiar and personal?
- **What is our history together?** Is it the first time we meet, have there been critical events in the past that carried consequences on this encounter?
- **What are the rules in our relation?** This includes both explicit/negotiated rules as well as implicit and unspoken ones.
- **What is the context of our interaction?** Would a different context change how we interact?

At its core, this assessment is instinctively conducted to assess people's intentions (are they a potential friend or threat, do they like us?), their ability to enact those intentions (how much power do they have?)¹ and what is the best way to will deal with them. As aforementioned, this assessment is done incredibly quickly and unconsciously to us, stopping and reflecting consciously about is helpful in certain circumstances.

1-Olivia Fox Cabane, author of the Charisma Myth

Different forms of power

We are referring to power as “possession of control, authority, or influence over others”.² Although the power that comes from authority may be more visible in concrete practices than other forms of power, we can witness power dynamics in settings that do not necessarily involve hierarchical relations (for instance amongst colleagues, within couples, between friends or neighbors, etc..). In fact, influencing (and in extreme situations, controlling) others can be done in many ways and is not bounded to positional power. In addition to authority, power comes from other sources such as one’s access to resources, knowledge and expertise, connections, confidence, skills, general capacity, etc...

One of the most famous division of types of power was presented by **French and Raven** in 1960. They suggest that the different existing powers one can exercise are: coercive (using force), reward (using money or resources), legitimate (influence through formal authority), referent (influence through personal characteristics or social connections), expert (influence through knowledge and expertise), and informational (influence through control of information).

We are often driven by a mixture of these power bases depending on the situation and can use them in various ways:³

POWER OVER	POWER TO	POWER WITH	POWER WITHIN
where a person or institution controls or constrains what another is able to do or think they can do or even imagine as possible. This includes domination, physical power, verbal/emotional power, manipulation...	refers to one’s capacity to act (very similar to the idea of agency). It can begin with the awareness that it is possible to act, and can grow in the process of taking action and realising that one can effect change, as well as through developing skills and capacities.	describes the capacity for a collective action or agency, and includes both the psychological and physical power that come from being united (joining together with others to address the situation, building shared understandings, planning and taking collective action).	(power from within) describes the sense of confidence, dignity and self-esteem that comes from gaining awareness of one’s situation and realising the possibility to do something about it

Called to mutual power

Our use and experience of power is intimately linked to our history, values and worldviews. It is also affected by how those we are trying to influence view our interventions, whether they find our exercise of power acceptable and how they react to it. In any power dynamic, we find ourselves affecting others and being affected by them at the same time.

2-Merriam Webster
3-Swedish International Development Agency

Attempts to gain power and influence are not inherently bad or always associated with abuse. On the contrary, when they are rooted in mutuality and reciprocity they promise to carry a lot of fruits. We find examples of powerful movements that brought about positive change without the recourse to violence or manipulation, individuals who managed to communicate powerful ideas by drawing on their expertise, social influencers who built positive and resonant relationships as solid powerbase...

Since power tends to corrupt, we are called to a discerning examen of our relationship to it and to others. When power is consistently unbalanced, our relationships risk becoming unfulfilling and dysfunctional. These non-mutual interactions send a clear message that says “one person’s desires and needs are more important than another’s”. Healthy relations, on the other hand, suppose an equal balance of influence and responsibility. In these relationships, honest communication, respect and mutuality neutralize any risk of abuse. Each party is aware of and attends to the other’s needs and expectations and correspondingly takes or gives up power.

Pope Francis reminds us: *“The more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don’t, your power will ruin you and ruin the other[...] Through humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power – the highest, the strongest one – becomes a service, a force for good.”* (TED Talk).

IGNATIAN NOTE

In *Exposcit debitum* (1550) we find the Formula of Institute of the Society of Jesus. This “formula” is a foundational document approved by the Pope (in this case Julius III) allowing for the existence of the Society and explaining how it should be governed. For the topic at hand, one part of this document is especially interesting:

“All should likewise vow that [...] they will be obedient to the one put in charge of the Society. (He should be the one best qualified for this office and will be elected by a majority of votes, as will be explained in the Constitutions.) Moreover, he should **possess all the authority and power** over the Society which are useful for its good administration, correction, and government.

What this text shows and reminds us is that we should not take power from those who govern an institution but rather to choose well those who can make the best out such power and that put it to the service of good. The Society of Jesus has worked with a very hierarchical structure for a long time, giving authority and power to those who govern, they have been able to do so because they first develop the individuals to be moved by the desire to love and serve in all things. Therefore, when they attain power, they use it for the good of their neighbours not for personal gain.

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Reflecting on the nature of our relations
2. Seeing power displayed through our interactions and detecting how we exercise it
3. Understanding mutuality in power

The measure of a man is what he does with power
Plato