

The Bases of Social Power

J. French & B. Raven, 1959. In D. Cartwright, *Studies in Social Power*, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan [excerpts]

By the basis of power, we mean the relationship between P (the Person) and O (the Other), which is the source of that power. Although there are undoubtedly many possible bases of power which may be distinguished, we shall here define five which seem especially common and important. These five bases of O's power are: (1) *reward power*, based on P's perception that O has the ability to mediate rewards for him; (2) *coercive power*, based on P's perception that O has the ability to mediate punishments for him; (3) *legitimate power*, based on the perception by P that O has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for him; (4) *referent power*, based on P's identification with O; (5) *expert power*, based on the perception that O has some special knowledge or expertise....

Reward Power

Reward power is defined as power whose basis is the ability to reward. The strength of the reward power of O over P increases with the magnitude of the rewards which P perceives that O can mediate for him. Reward power depends on O's ability to administer positive valences and to remove or decrease negative valences. A common example of reward power is the addition of a piecework rate in the factory as an incentive to increase production. The factory worker's increased level of production will be highly dependent on O. Since O mediates the reward, he controls the probability that P will receive it. Thus P's new rate of production will be dependent on his subjective probability that O will reward him for conformity minus his subjective probability that O will reward him even if he returns to his old level. Both probabilities will be greatly affected by the level of observability of P's behavior.

Coercive Power

Coercive power of O over P stems from the expectation on the part of P that he will be punished by O if he fails to conform to the influence attempt. Just as an offer of a piece-rate

bonus in a factory can serve as a basis for reward power, so the ability to fire a worker if he falls below a given level of production will result in coercive power. Coercive power leads to dependent change also; and the degree of dependence varies with the level of observability of P's conformity. An excellent illustration of coercive power leading to dependent change is provided by a clothes presser in a factory. As her efficiency rating climbed above average for the group the other workers began to "scapegoat" her. That the resulting plateau in her production was not independent of the group was evident once she was removed from the presence of the other workers. Her production immediately climbed to new heights.

Legitimate Power

Legitimate power of O over P is here defined as that power which stems from internalized values in P which dictate that O has a legitimate right to influence P, and that P has an obligation to accept this influence. Cultural values constitute one common basis for the legitimate power of one individual over another. In some cultures, the aged are granted the right to prescribe behavior for others in practically all behavior areas. In most cultures, there are certain areas of behavior in which a person of one sex is granted the right to prescribe behavior for the other sex.

Acceptance of the social structure is another basis for legitimate power. For example legitimate power in a formal organization is largely a relationship between offices rather than between persons. And the acceptance of an office as *right* is a basis for legitimate power – a judge has a right to levy fines; a foreman should assign work; a priest is justified in prescribing religious beliefs; and it is the management's prerogative to make certain decisions.

The areas in which legitimate power may be exercised are generally specified along with the designation of that power. A job description, for example, usually specifies supervisory activities

and also designates the person to whom the jobholder is responsible for the duties described. Some bases for legitimate authority carry with them a very broad range. Culturally derived bases for legitimate power are often especially broad. It is not uncommon to find cultures in which a member of a given caste can legitimately prescribe behavior for all members of lower castes in practically all regions. More common, however, are instances of legitimate power where the range is specifically and narrowly prescribed. A sergeant in the army is given a specific set of regions within which he can legitimately prescribe behavior for his men.

The attempted use of legitimate power which is outside of the range of legitimate power will decrease the legitimate power of the authority figure. Such use of power which is not legitimate will also decrease the attractiveness of O.

Referent Power

The referent power of O over P has its basis in the identification of P with O. By identification, we mean a feeling of oneness of P with O, or a desire for such a identity. If O is a person toward whom P is highly attracted, P will have a desire to become closely associated with O. If O is an attractive group, P will have a feeling of membership or a desire to join. Accordingly, O has the ability to influence P, even though P may be unaware of this referent power. A verbalization of

such power by P might be, "I am like O, and therefore I shall behave or believe as O does," or "I want to be like O, and I will be more like O if I behave or believe as O does." The stronger the identification of P with O the greater the referent power of O over P. P is often not consciously aware of the referent power which O exerts over him.

Expert Power

The strength of the expert power of O over P varies with the extent of the knowledge or perception which P attributes to O within a given area. Accepting an attorney's advice in legal matters is a common example of expert influence; but there are many instances based on much less knowledge, such as the acceptance by a stranger of directions given by a native villager.

- *For all five types, the stronger the basis of power, the greater the power.*
- *For any type of power, the size of the range may vary greatly, but, in general, referent power will have the broadest range.*
- *Any attempt to use power outside the range of power will tend to reduce the power.*