

The Bases of Power Revisited: An Interpersonal Perceptions Perspective

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Although power is fundamental to interpersonal processes, relatively little research has focused on the interpersonal aspects of power within organizations. In this article, we review one of the predominant typologies in social power research, French and Raven's (1959) Bases of Social Power. We extend that typology by considering how power utilization attempts and outcomes associated with each basis of power is likely impacted by the interpersonal perceptions and meta-perceptions of those who hold (or perceive themselves to hold) power.

INTRODUCTION

Power is central to interpersonal and group processes and is foundational in the study of organizations (e.g., Bernard, 1938; Festinger, 1953; Lewin, 1947; Sherif, 1936; Weber, 1947). Although there are many conceptualizations of power, one of the most ubiquitous is the typology of social influence advanced by French and Raven (1959). Within those authors' "Bases of Social Power" framework, power is inherent to social exchange; it is both a product and shaper of social interaction. Despite the inherently interpersonal nature of social power and the key role it plays in organizational psychology (Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998), however, research focusing on the interpersonal aspects of power within organizations is largely lacking. Moreover, we argue that interpersonal perceptions and the accuracy of those perceptions likely play vital roles within interpersonal power dynamics but heretofore have received little research attention.

Interpersonal perceptions and the accuracy of those perceptions should be considered within interpersonal power dynamics because until, or unless, someone attempts to exercise power, power (or lack thereof) resides only in people's minds. For example, a person might perceive that others view him or her as holding power over them and, as a result of that perception (but independent of its accuracy), judge him- or herself to *be* powerful. In reality, however, the true perceptions of others are not readily knowable and must often be inferred (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Generally people are not adept at making inferences about the views that others hold of them (e.g., DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987); as such, the perceptions they believe others have of them typically correspond little with reality (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Thus, although a person might perceive him- or herself as holding power, that "power" might exist only in his or her own mind.

Although social perceptions might create one's reality (Snyder, 1984), the perceptions upon which that "reality" is based are often quite inaccurate (Jussim, 1991). The current research seeks to build from

that assumption to enhance the utility of French and Raven's conceptualization of social power for explaining interpersonal power dynamics within organizations. In pursuit of that goal, we reexamine each of the bases of power through the lens of interpersonal perception and interpersonal perception accuracy, augmenting the social power bases framework with insights from the interpersonal perceptions, meta-perceptions, and meta-accuracy literatures.

META-PERCEPTIONS AND META-ACCURACY

We define a *meta-perception* as a person's construal of the perception(s) that one or more others hold regarding that person (Turner & Robinson, 2011; c.f., Albright, Forest, & Reiseter, 2001; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Vorauer & Miller, 1997). The explicit study of the meta-perception process (Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966) focuses on how individuals form perceptions or beliefs about how they are viewed by others, either as individuals (Frey & Tropp, 2006) or as representatives of their social categories (Méndez, Gómez, & Tropp, 2007; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Because people generally are concerned with the views others hold of them, meta-perceptions matter.

Meta-perceptions are believed to motivate interpersonal actions and guide social interactions (e.g., Albright, et al, 2001). A growing body of literature, predominantly within the social psychology research domain but increasingly in other areas of research, suggests that the meta-perceptions matter. The perceptions that people believe that others have of them in relation personal factors such as likeableness, sexuality, prejudice, attractiveness, competence, and skill (Kenny, Albright, Malloy, & Kashy, 1994; Malloy, Kenny, Albright, Agatstein, & Winquist, 1997; Levesque, 1997; Swim, Johnston, & Pearson, 2009; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998; Anderson et al, 2008) exert important influences on people's behaviors. So, too, do meta-perceptions relating to interpersonal attributes such as leadership, status, and fame (Malloy & Janowski, 1992; DePaulo et al., 1987).

To form accurate meta-perceptions is to know the mind of others, and knowing the mind of others is difficult: *Meta-accuracy*, which we define as the degree to which meta-perceptions correspond with the actual perceptions with which they are coupled (Turner & Robinson, 2011), is typically quite low (Kenny, Albright, Malloy, & Kashy, 1994; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). Meta-accuracy can be hampered both by individual attributes such as narcissism (Oltmanns, Gleason, Klonsky, & Turkheimer, 2005) or need for social approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) and by external factors such as the hesitancy of others to convey evaluative information (e.g., Felson, 1980; Swann & Gill, 1997) or others' attempts at manipulation, revenge, or even kindness (Anderson et al., 2008; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Oltmanns et al., 2005).

FRENCH AND RAVEN'S TYPOLOGY REVISITED

According to French and Raven's foundational work, there are six fundamental types or *bases* of power in social contexts. Each type of power—reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, referent, and informational—represents a different underlying source of motivation for its target. For two of the power bases, motivation arises essentially from quid-pro-quo transactions in which behaviors are exchanged for rewards or punishments. For the others, motivation arises from social influence and/or social exchange.

Reward Power and Coercive Power

The most rudimentary types of power are reward power and coercive power, which are enacted through transactional exchanges. When exercising these power bases, the holder of power (*H*) observes the behaviors of the target (*T*). *H* gives rewards or removes punishments to the extent that *T* behaves as desired and administers punishments or withholds rewards to the extent that *T* fails to behave as desired.

Reward power depends on ability of the *H* to administer positive valences or to decrease negative valences—to give rewards or remove punishments. The range of rewards as a basis of power is limited to those regions of behavior for the *T* in which *H* can legitimately offer rewards. For instance, *T*'s supervisor might be able to offer a salary increase for exceptional work performance, but offering the same reward

for voting for a specific candidate in a presidential election would not be legitimate. The latter case would result in a diminishment in *H*'s future reward power.

Coercive power is based on *H*'s ability to punish *T* for failure to conform to *H*'s wishes. Whereas reward power can eventually persist without continued rewards, coercive power remains contingent on *H*'s ability to punish *T*. The strength of coercive power depends on the valence of the threatened punishment—how much suffering it will inflict on *T*—and the probability that *T* can avoid the punishment by conforming. It also depends on the degree to which *H* can monitor *T*. Coercive power exerts force on *T* to vacate the shared space, which requires *H* to introduce restraining forces to prevent this from occurring.

Reward and coercive power bases rely on a belief by *H* about whether or not *T* perceives *H* as both able and willing to reward [punish]¹ *T*'s conformity [nonconformity]. This meta-perception should determine the extent to which *H* is willing to attempt to leverage a reward [punishment] as a basis of power. If *H* perceives that *T* does not believe that *H* is willing and able to deliver the reward [punishment] whereas *T* actually does believe that *H* is willing and able to deliver, *H* will underestimate his or her ability to affect *T*'s behavior. Conversely, if *H* overestimates the extent to which *T* believes that *H* is willing and able to deliver, attempts to exercise that power basis might not yield expected or desired results.

Furthermore, the accuracy of *H*'s perception of the extent to which *T* values [wishes to avoid] a potential reward [punishment] is likely to affect the capacity of the reward [punishment] to influence *T*'s behavior. If *H* has high accuracy concerning *T*'s like [dislike] of the reward [punishment] such that *H* correctly believes that *T* will rigorously seek [seek to avoid] the reward [punishment], then *T* will be motivated to the extent *T* perceives *H* as having both the ability and willingness to reward [punish] *T*'s conformity [nonconformity], and to the extent that he/she values receiving [avoiding] that reward [punishment] and feels the behavior required is doable.

If *H*'s accuracy is low, either in (1) the perception that *T* believes *H* can and will act; (2) the perception that *T* has a sufficient level of attraction [aversion] to the proffered reward [punishment]; or (3) both, *H* might make promises [threats] that will yield little, if any, motivation for *T*. Further, if *H*'s low perception accuracies cause *H* to make an attempt to utilize power that *T* views as illegitimate, this might lead to a loss of future power for *H*, since *H*'s promises [threats] will be revealed to be hollow. Moreover, low accuracy by *H* might also increase the strength required of future rewards [punishments] in order to make the perceived probability * strength of reward [punishment] sufficient to motivate desired behaviors from *T*. High perception accuracy, on the other hand, should lead to stable or increased future power as *H*'s word remains untested and/or will be shown credible.

Raven (1992) noted the potentially strong power of approval and acceptance from a valued other as a source of reward power (*personal reward power*) and the threat of rejection or ostracism from such a power holder as a source of coercive power (*personal coercive power*). This delineates them from the *impersonal* forms of these power bases (e.g., monetary rewards in the former case and termination in the latter).

The risks of low interpersonal perception accuracy in relation to valence level of the reward [punishment] should be greater when personal forms are enacted since the reward [punishment] in such cases is the social approval [disapproval] of *H*. *T* in fact might not care if *H* adores or despises *T*. When the reward [punishment] is impersonal in nature, risks of low accuracy in relation to valence should be lower since the reward [punishment] at hand is more concrete.

We turn next to the less rudimentary types of power—legitimate power, referent power, expert power, and informational power. The motivating ability of these power bases lies not in rewards or punishments that *H* might give or withhold in exchange for *T*'s behaviors but, rather, in *H*'s abilities and expertise, social station, or social desirability. Each of these four power bases can yield internalized cognitive changes for *T*; when such changes occur, they have the potential to guide *T*'s future behaviors.

Legitimate Power

Legitimate power is that power which has as its basis culture, tradition, or structure. All forms of legitimacy as a basis of power rely, implicitly or explicitly, on *H* conveying to *T*: “I have a right to ask you to do this and you have an obligation to comply” (Raven, 1992, p. 220). *H* perceives that she has the right to prescribe behavior to *T*, and *T* acts because of a feeling of *oughtness*. Ultimately, the motivation of legitimacy arises from some internalized norm or value within *T*; *H* need not cultivate these values. Bases for legitimacy can be very broad (e.g., *H* holds the position of religious leader in a culture in which religion is valued and *T* is a member) or very specific or narrowly prescribed (e.g., *H* holds the title of “Line B nighttime supervisor”).

Although much research has focused most on legitimacy arising from positional or authoritative pressures (Cialdini, 1988), there are other forms of legitimate power that arise from social norms and are more subtle. One such form is the *legitimate power of reciprocity* which prescribes quid-pro-quo exchange within relationships. *Legitimate power of equity*, on the other hand, is based on the idea of compensatory norms—“I have worked hard and suffered, so I have a right to ask you to make up for it” (Raven, 1992, p. 221). *Legitimate power of responsibility* relies on the presumed responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves and/or mankind’s willingness to aid another voluntarily.

Attempts by *H* to leverage legitimate power suggest that *H* believes that *T* perceives him or her as the holder of legitimate power, and the accuracy of such meta-perceptions should influence the motivation arising from those attempts. If *H*’s meta-accuracy is low and *H* presents as a legitimate power holder, the power utilization attempt is likely to yield little, if any, motivation for *T* (*T* to *H*: “Who do you think you are?”). Further, *H*’s low meta-accuracy and subsequent failed power utilization attempt should lead to a loss of future legitimate power because *H*’s credibility—a necessity in norm-based authority—will have been diminished by the failed attempt. Conversely, high meta-accuracy should lead to increased future legitimate power for *H* by enabling successful power utilization attempts and preventing *H* from attempting to utilize legitimate power that does not actually exist.

The importance of perception accuracy in relation to legitimate power should vary in accordance with the source of legitimacy underlying it. In *formal legitimacy* situations such as when *H* is in a formal position of power over *T*, for example, meta-accuracy should be comparatively less important than in informal situations. Organizational hierarchies are typically well-defined and there exists a strong norm within most organizations to follow the directions of one’s superior; the perceptions that *T* holds about *H*’s legitimacy should matter little if *H* is the CEO and *T* wishes to remain employed, for example.

Conversely, in *legitimacy of dependence* scenarios, interpersonal perception accuracy should be very important. If *H* erroneously perceives that *T* is susceptible to dependence manipulations when in fact *T* is not, the influence attempt would likely be unfruitful. Moreover, such an ill-informed power utilization attempt would also likely erode of *T*’s respect for *H*, and as a consequence, the loss of other bases of power for *H* over *T* (e.g., referent or expert power) could result.

Referent Power

Referent power is that power that has as its basis *T*’s desire to identify with or feel as one with *H* (as an individual referent or member of a referent group). *H*’s referent power is evidenced by *T* behaving in such a way as to win the acceptance of *H*. Conversely, a referent or referent group which *T* dislikes and/or evaluates negatively may influence *T* to disassociate himself from *H*. Referent power can exert influence in a variety of life domains; as a simple illustration, a teenager may misbehave at school in order to win the acceptance of peers and carry that same behavior into home life even though those peers are not in the home to observe the behaviors.

From a meta-perception and meta-accuracy vantage point, while *H* can unwittingly exercise either positive or negative referent power, intentional attempts to leverage a relationship (or potential relationship) as a source of power suggest that *H* believes that *T* perceives *H* as an attractive person with whom to be associated. The accuracy of that meta-perception should determine the motivating capacity of those attempts.

In instances in which *H*'s meta-accuracy is high, *T* should be motivated by the desire to be one with *H* to the extent that *T* values that oneness. High meta-accuracy should lead to increased future referent power because the successful referent power utilization attempts it should enable would draw *T* closer to *H*. If *H*'s meta-accuracy is low, however, *H* might attempt to leverage the relationship or potential relationship, but this attempt should either yield little or no motivation for *T* (*T* to *H*: "I do not want to be your friend, so why would I give you the better lunch period?") or even repulse *T* (*T* to *H*: "I was going to join that club, but now that I know that you are a member and you have asked me to join, I am not going to.").

Expert Power

Expert power relies on *H*'s level of expertise, with *T* making the assessment of that expertise against *T*'s own knowledge and/or against an absolute standard. Expert power acts on the way *T* thinks and, in doing so, indirectly leads to changes in *T*'s behavior. The range of expert power is more restricted than referent power, though halo effects sometimes do occur.

Viewed through a meta-perceptions and meta-accuracy lens, *H*'s belief that *T* perceives *H* as being an expert in a given area is a necessary condition for *H* to attempt to leverage that power. The accuracy of that meta-perception should determine the motivating capacity of those attempts. Negative expert power (i.e., that power which results in someone doing the opposite of what an expert says because the person does not trust the expert), indicates *H*'s meta-perception of his or her expert status is erroneous. When *H* correctly perceives that *T* sees *H* as a knowledgeable expert, *T* should be motivated by that perception to the extent that *T* feels expert advice is necessary and should be heeded.

If *H*'s meta-accuracy is low, *H* might present as an expert and attempt to exert expert power, but that attempt should yield little, if any, motivation for *T* (*T* to *H*: "I don't need *your* help!"). Further, *H*'s low meta-accuracy might also lead to a loss of future expert power because *H*'s credibility might be diminished, and credibility underlies expertise-based power. High meta-accuracy, on the other hand, should lead to increased future power because a successful expert power utilization attempt would reinforce *H*'s expert status.

Informational Power

Informational power is a subset of expert power that does not depend on shared group membership with the "expert"; *T* and *H* are socially independent. A simple illustration is French and Raven's example of *T* asking a stranger for directions in a foreign city. In that example, *T* assumes *H* holds sufficient expertise to direct *T*. Raven (1992) distinguishes *direct* and *indirect informational power*, based on differences in the way in which information is presented. In situations in which *H* holds a lower position than *T*, an indirect presentation (e.g., if *T* were to overhear *H* discussing a course of action for an upcoming decision) might be more powerful than an explicit presentation of a logical argument by *H* to *T* (such as if *T* were to come to *H* and suggest that a course of action be adopted).

The outcome of a decision to utilize a direct or indirect route in exercising informational power should be influenced by *H*'s meta-accuracy. If *H* believes that *T* views *H* as having sufficient standing as to proffer unsolicited information to aid *T* in a decision and that is, in fact, the case (high meta-accuracy), then *T* is more likely to welcome that information and act upon it than if *T* did not actually hold such favorable views of *H*. If, however, *H*'s meta-accuracy is low and *T* does not view *H* as having sufficient standing or knowledge to proffer information and *H* makes a direct attempt at utilizing information power, *T* might forego that influence even if the course of action suggested is the best option, *ceteris paribus*.

Conversely, if *T* views *H* as competent and knowledgeable and *H* elects to utilize an indirect route to exercise informational power because of *H*'s low meta-accuracy (i.e., failure to recognize that *T* views him or her as competent and knowledgeable), the strength of *H*'s influence attempt might be reduced. For example, an indirect influence attempt would not allow *H* the opportunity to interact directly with *T* and emphasize why the information should be acted upon.

DISCUSSION

Notions of social power are deeply enmeshed with such critical aspects of organizational psychology and organizational studies as leadership and leader-member exchange (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), social influence (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), empowerment (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Gordon, 2005), organizational politics (e.g., Zaleznik, 1970) and, more recently, the study of “dark-side” behaviors like abusive supervision, bullying, and discrimination (e.g., Barclay, 1982; Robinson & Bennett, 2000; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). This paper sought to advance the study of interpersonal power and influence techniques by emphasizing the importance of interpersonal perception, meta-perception, and meta-accuracy.

Given the enduring importance of power within the workplace and of power studies to organizational scholarship, we hope that this paper stimulates further discussion about the role of interpersonal perceptions in interpersonal power dynamics. We contended that power utilization decisions are informed by interpersonal perceptions. We further argued that the accuracy of those perceptions influence targets’ reactions when power utilization attempts are made and might also influence future power dynamics. Future research that refines and/or empirically tests the theoretical advancements we have proposed should prove valuable, both for research and for practice.

ENDNOTE

¹This section will demonstrate theory expansion using the reward power base; however, all statements are equally valid for coercive power. The reader can understand the latter by replacing the word immediately preceding square brackets with the words inside those brackets.

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