

UNDERSTANDING POWER DYNAMICS

Power is a person's ability to exert influence and control. Power dynamics describes how power affects a relationship between two or more people.

Power affects all aspects of social life, from the workplace to the home. Power is not inherently negative. For example, the ability of a parent to influence their toddler's actions can help keep them out of harm's way. But if a person abuses their power, it has the capacity to do great harm.

When an individual is subjected to inappropriate uses of power, they can experience great distress. Likewise, a person with lots of power may not know how to exercise it in a productive and ethical manner. A counsellor or therapist can help individuals on all sides of a conflict develop healthier power dynamics in their relationships.

TYPES OF POWER

Power allows a person to affect the people, environments, and events around them. In the 1950s, psychologists John French and Bertram Raven theorized there are five main types of power (later they added two more to make seven). These power types are:

Coercive power: The ability to offer punishments to deter certain actions. For example, a cop can arrest thieves.

Reward power: The ability to give out rewards for desired behaviour. For example, a parent may reward their child with a cookie in exchange for doing chores.

Formal power: Also called legitimate or titular power. This power comes from having an official position. For example, the CEO of a company can fire workers below them.

Connection power: The ability to offer access to certain people or resources. For example, an agent can introduce an actor to a film producer.

Referent power: Influence that comes from being liked by others. For example, a popular, charismatic student may create a new fashion trend at school.

Informational power: Influence that comes from knowledge and information. For example, a spy may know the location of an enemy base.

Expert power: Influence that comes from having exceptional skills. For example, a talented carpenter may have a lot of power in a town that needs furniture.

These types of power may overlap in some situations. It is common for an individual to have multiple types of power.

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POWER DYNAMICS IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Power dynamics can and often do affect interpersonal relationships. In relationships that are strong and healthy, power is generally equal or close to equal. Partners may not have equivalent kinds of power: one partner may have more financial resources while the other has more social connections. However, influence is often reciprocal. Healthy partners often work together respectfully and each have a hand in decision-making.

A balanced relationship – one in which power is, for the most part, held equally – might be represented by some of the following elements:

- Both partners know their value.
- Partners listen to each other and make changes based on the feelings and interests of the other.
- Partners respect each other, even in times of disagreement.
- Partners talk to each other, especially when issues develop or miscommunications occur.

Problems can develop when there is a power imbalance in the relationship. For example, if a person makes more money than their partner, they may begin to feel entitled to make all decisions about how the money is spent, rather than seeking their partner's opinion. In cases of abuse, an individual may try to limit their partner's power through isolation and threats so that they can have complete control.

Meanwhile, the partner without power may grow resentful or feel taken for granted. They may withdraw from the relationship to protect their own self-esteem. For example, someone who considers themselves the less attractive partner in a relationship may feel insecure and avoid intimacy.

When a relationship has been impacted by power imbalances, couples counselling can help partners communicate their concerns and develop healthier behaviours.

POWER DYNAMICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Power can affect workplace dynamics in various ways. Common power-related issues that often come up in a professional environment include:

- **Salary and wage negotiation**

Bargaining power comes into play when discussing salary at time of hire or during a review. In some cases, the employee has more bargaining power and may be able to negotiate a higher salary.

This could happen if the employee has a unique skillset, has increased company revenue, or is needed by the company for a specific reason. In other cases, the company may have more bargaining power. This could happen in fields where there is a lot of competition for jobs.

- **Bullying or harassment**

In workplace settings, bullying often goes unpunished because of imbalanced power dynamics. If a person with more power bullies another person in the company, the person being bullied may avoid telling anyone due to fear of retaliation. It's not always easy to find a new position, and a person who needs steady income may decide putting up with bullying is preferable to unemployment. People can also misuse power in the workplace by forcing others to complete menial tasks unrelated to their job (such as getting coffee) or to put up with sexual harassment.

- **Arbitration**

This process describes a neutral party's resolution of a disagreement between two or more parties. The neutral party, or arbitrator, makes a decision based on evidence given by the people involved. Arbitration is a private process, and it doesn't take as long as a trial, so it can be useful for resolving workplace conflicts. However, the arbitrator has the power to make a binding decision, so it's important the arbitrator be truly neutral and not influenced by one party's power over the other. When arbitration is successful, the person or group wronged by a power imbalance may receive damages or other compensation.

When a power imbalance at work harms an individual, a counsellor or therapist can help them devise strategies for asserting their own needs in a professional manner.