

4.6: Power and Influence

Learning Outcomes

- Define the term “influence” and explain the three levels of influence.
- Define the word “power” and explain the six bases of power.

One of the primary reasons we engage in a variety of interpersonal relationships over our lifetimes is to influence others. We live in a world where we constantly need to accomplish a variety of goals, so being able to get others to jump on board with our goals is a very important part of social survival. As such, we define **influence** when an individual or group of people alters another person’s thinking, feelings, and/ or behaviors through accidental, expressive, or rhetorical communication.²⁷ Notice this definition of influence is one that focuses on the importance of communication within the interaction. Within this definition, we discuss three specific types of communication: accidental, expressive, or rhetorical.

First, we have accidental communication, or when we send messages to another person without realizing those messages are being sent. Imagine you are walking through your campus’ food court and notice a table set up for a specific charity. A person who we really respect is hanging out at the table laughing and smiling, so you decide to donate a dollar to the charity. The person who was just hanging out at the table influenced your decision to donate. They could have just been talking to another friend and may not have even really been a supporter of the charity, but their presence was enough to influence your donation. At the same time, we often influence others to think, feel, and behave in ways they wouldn’t have unconsciously. A smile, a frown, a head nod, or eye aversion can all be nonverbal indicators to other people, which could influence them. There’s a great commercial on television that demonstrates this. The commercial starts with someone holding the door for another person, then this person turns around and does something kind to another person, and this “paying it forward” continues through the entire commercial. In each incident, no one said to the person they were helping to “pay it forward,” they just did.

The second type of communication we can have is **expressive or emotionally-based communication**. Our emotional states can often influence other people. If we are happy, others can become happy, and if we are sad, others may avoid us altogether. Maybe you’ve walked into a room and seen someone crying, so you ask, “Are you OK?” Instead of responding, the person just turns and glowers at you, so you turn around and leave. With just one look, this person influenced your behavior.

The final type of communication, **rhetorical communication**, involves purposefully creating and sending messages to another person in the hopes of altering another person’s thinking, feelings, and/or behaviors. Accidental communication is not planned. Expressive communication is often not conscious at all. However, rhetorical communication is purposeful. When we are using rhetorical communication to influence another person(s), we know that we are trying to influence that person(s).

Levels of Influence

In 1958 social psychologist Herbert Kelman first noted that there are three basic levels of influence: compliance, identification, and internalization.²⁸ Kelman’s basic theory was that changes in a person’s thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors occur at different levels, which results in different processes an individual uses to achieve conformity with an influencer. Let’s look at each of these three levels separately.

Compliance

The first, and weakest, form of influence is compliance. **Compliance** implies that an individual accepts influence and alters their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors. However, this change in thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors is transitory and only lasts as long as the individual sees compliance as beneficial.²⁹ Generally, people accept influence at this level because they perceive the rewards or punishments for influence to be in their best interest. As such, this form of influence is very superficial.³⁰

Identification

The second form of influence discussed by Kelman is **identification**, which is based purely in the realm of relationships. Identification occurs when an individual accepts influence because they want to have a satisfying relationship with the influencer or influencing group. “The individual actually believes in the responses which he [or she] adopts through identification, but their specific content is more or less irrelevant. He [or she] adopts the induced behavior because it is associated with the desired relationship. Thus the satisfaction derived from identification due to the act of conforming as such.”³¹ Notice that Kelman is arguing that the actual change to thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors is less of an issue that the relationship and the act of

conforming. However, if an individual ever decides that the relationship and identification with the influencing individual or group are not beneficial, then the influencing attempts will disappear, and the individual will naturally go back to their original thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors.

Internalization

The final level of influence proposed by Kelman is **internalization**, which occurs when an individual adopts influence and alters their thinking, feeling, and/or behaviors because doing so is intrinsically rewarding. Ultimately, changing one's thinking, feelings, and/or behavior happens at the internalization level because an individual sees this change as either coinciding with their value system, considers the change useful, or fulfills a need the individual has. Influence that happens at this level becomes highly intertwined with the individual's perception of self, so this type of influence tends to be long-lasting.

French & Raven's Five Bases of Power

When you hear the word “power,” what comes to mind? Maybe you think of a powerful person like a Superhero or the President of the United States. For social scientists, we use the word “power” in a very specific way. **Power** is the degree that a social agent (A) has the ability to get another person(s) (P) to alter their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors. First, you have a social agent (A), which can come in a variety of different forms: another person, a role someone embodies, a group rule or norm, or a group or part of a group.³² Next, we have the person(s) who is being influenced by the goal to be a specific change in thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors. When we discussed influence above, we talked about it in terms of communication: accidental, expressive, and rhetorical. When we deal with power, we are only dealing in the realm of rhetorical communication because the person exerting power over another person is consciously goal-directed.



Figure 4.6.1: French & Raven's Five Bases of Power

Probably the most important people in the realm of power have been John French and Bertram Raven. In 1959, French and Raven identified five unique bases of power that people can use to influence others (coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent).³³ At the time of their original publication, there was a sixth base of power that Raven attempted to argue for, informational. Although he lost the battle in the initial publication, subsequent research by Raven on the subject of the bases of power have all included informational power.³⁴

Let's examine each of these five bases of power.

Informational

The first basis of power is the last one originally proposed by Raven.³⁵ **Informational power** refers to a social agent's ability to bring about a change in thought, feeling, and/or behavior through information. For example, since you initially started school, teachers have had informational power over you. They have provided you with a range of information on history, science, grammar, art, etc. that shape how you think (what constitutes history?), feel (what does it mean to be aesthetically pleasing?), and behave (how do you properly mix chemicals in a lab?). In some ways, informational power is very strong, because it's often the first form of power with which we come into contact. In fact, when you are taught how to think, feel, and/or behave, this change “now continues without the target necessarily referring to, or even remembering, the [influencer] as being the agent of change.”³⁶

Coercive and Reward

The second base of power is **coercive power**, which is the ability to punish an individual who does not comply with one's influencing attempts. On the other end of the spectrum, we have **reward power** (3rd base of power), which is the ability to offer an individual rewards for complying with one's influencing attempts. We talk about these two bases of power together because they are two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, the same problems with this type of power apply equally to both. Influence can happen if you punish or reward someone; however, as soon as you take away that punishment or reward, the thoughts, feelings, and/or behavior will reverse back to its initial state. Hence, we refer to both coercive and reward power as attempts to get someone to comply with influence, because this is the highest level of influence one can hope to achieve with these two forms of power.

Legitimate

The fourth base of power is **legitimate power**, or influence that occurs because a person (P) believes that the social agent (A) has a valid right to influence P, and P has an obligation to accept A's attempt to influence P's thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors. French and Raven argued that there were two common forms of legitimate power: cultural and structural. Cultural legitimate power occurs when a change agent is viewed as having the right to influence others because of their role in the culture. For example, in some cultures, the elderly may have a stronger right to influence than younger members of that culture. Structural legitimate power, on the other hand, occurs because someone fulfills a specific position within the social hierarchy. For example, your boss may have the legitimate right to influence your thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors in the workplace because they are above you in the organizational hierarchy.³⁷

Expert

The fifth base of power is **expert power**, or the power we give an individual to influence us because of their perceived knowledge. For example, we often give our physicians the ability to influence our behavior (e.g., eat right, exercise, take medication) because we view these individuals as having specialized knowledge. However, this type of influence only is effective if P believes A is an expert, P trusts A, and P believes that A is telling the truth.

One problem we often face in the 21st Century involves the conceptualization of the word "expert." Many people in today's world can be perceived as "experts" just because they write a book, have a talk show, were on a reality TV show, or are seen on news programs.³⁸ Many of these so-called "experts" may have no reasonable skill or knowledge but they can be trumpeted as experts. One of the problems with the Internet is the fundamental flaw that anyone can put information online with only an opinion and no actual facts. Additionally, we often engage in debates about "facts" because we have different talking heads telling us different information. Historically, expert power was always a very strong form of power, but there is growing concern that we are losing expertise and knowledge to unsubstantiated opinions and rumor mongering.

At the same time, there is quite a bit of research demonstrating that many people are either unskilled or unknowledgeable and completely unaware of their lack of expertise. This problem has been called the **Dunning-Kruger effect**, or the tendency of some people to inflate their expertise when they really have nothing to back up that perception.³⁹ As you can imagine, having a lot of people who think they are experts spouting off information that is untrue can be highly problematic in society. For example, do you really want to take medical advice from a TV star? Many people do. While we have some people who inflate their expertise, on the other end of the spectrum, some people suffer from imposter syndrome, which occurs when people devalue or simply do not recognize their knowledge and skills. Imposter syndrome is generally a problem with highly educated people like doctors, lawyers, professors, business executives, etc. The fear is that someone will find out that they are a fraud.

Referent

The final base of power originally discussed by French and Raven is **referent power**, or a social agent's ability to influence another person because P wants to be associated with A. Ultimately, referent power is about relationship building and the desire for a relationship. If A is a person P finds attractive, then P will do whatever they need to do to become associated with A. If A belongs to a group, then P will want to join that group. Ultimately, this relationship exists because P wants to think, feel, and behave as A does. For example, if A decides that he likes modern art, then P will also decide to like modern art. If A has a very strong work ethic in the workplace, then P will adopt a strong work ethic in the workplace as well. Often A has no idea of the influence they are having over P. Ultimately, the stronger P desires to be associated with A, the more referent power A has over P.

Influence and Power

By now, you may be wondering about the relationship between influence and power. Research has examined the relationship between the three levels of influence and the six bases of power. Coercive, reward, and legitimate power only influence people at

the compliance level. Whereas, informational, expert, and referent power have been shown to influence people at all three levels of influence: compliance, identification, and internalization.⁴⁰ When you think about your own interpersonal influencing goals, you really need to consider what level of influence you desire a person's change in thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors to be. If your goal is just to get the change quickly, then using coercive, reward, and legitimate power may be the best route. If, however, you want to ensure long-term influence, then using informational, expert, and referent power are probably the best routes to use.

Research Spotlight



In 2013, Shireen Abuhatum and Nina Howe set out to explore how siblings use French and Raven's bases of power in their relationships. Specifically, they examined how older siblings (average age of 7 years old) interacted with their younger siblings (average age was 4 ½ years old). Sibling pairs were recorded playing at home with a wooden farm set that was provided for the observational study. Each recorded video lasted for 15-minutes. The researchers then coded the children's verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The goal was to see what types of power strategies the siblings employed while playing.

Unsurprisingly, older siblings were more likely to engage in power displays with their younger siblings to get what they wanted. However, younger siblings were more likely to appeal to a third party (usually an adult) to get their way.

The researchers also noted that when it came to getting a desired piece of the farm to play with, older siblings were more likely to use coercive power. Younger siblings were more likely to employ legitimate power as an attempt to achieve a compromise.

Abuhatum, S., & Howe, N. (2013). Power in sibling conflict during early and middle childhood. *Social Development*, 22(4), 738–754. doi.org/10.1111/sode.12021

Key Takeaways

- Herbert Kelman noted that there are three basic levels of influence: compliance (getting someone to alter behavior), identification (altering someone's behavior because they want to be identified with a person or group), and internalization (influence that occurs because someone wants to be in a relationship with an influencer).
- French and Raven have devised six basic bases of power: informational, coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, and referent. First, we have informational power, or the power we have over others as we provide them knowledge. Second, we have coercive power, or the ability to punish someone for noncompliance. Third, we have reward power, or the ability to reward someone for compliance. Fourth we have legitimate power, or power someone has because of their position within a culture or a hierarchical structure. Fifth, we have expert power, or power that someone exerts because they are perceived as having specific knowledge or skills. Lastly, we have referent power, or power that occurs because an individual wants to be associated with another person.

Exercises

1. Think of a time when you've been influenced at all three of Kelman's levels of influence. How were each of these situations of influence different from each other? How were the different levels of influence achieved?
2. Think of each of the following situations and which form of power would best be used and why:
 - A mother wants her child to eat his vegetables.
 - A police officer wants to influence people to slow down in residential neighborhoods.
 - The Surgeon General of the United States wants people to become more aware of the problems of transsaturated fats in their diets.
 - A friend wants to influence his best friend to stop doing drugs.

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