

**A THEORETICAL INVESTIGATION ON THE ROLE OF POWER IN
ORGANIZATIONS: THE POWER OVER APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the power concept and the role of power in organizations. The “power over” approach, as a main dimension to understand power, is tried to be clarified with a historical focus. This study focuses on the power over approach, and the role of this approach on the relationships among individuals. Power over approach argues that power exists because of conflict of interest. So power is primarily about to overcome conflict of interest which occurs when people want different things and have different interests that lie in different directions. In this context, conceptual development of the power over approach, power over approach in organizations, power to approach, the distinction between these approaches and reflection of this distinction to organizational environment is explained. The role of power over and power to approaches on the conflicts among individuals and collective actions in the organizations is also discussed. It is concluded that power relations are important to overcome conflict of interest.

Keywords: Power, organizational power, power over, power to

1. INTRODUCTION

Power is an important concept and central to any understanding of society. It is perhaps the most pervasive social phenomenon that has been of particular interest to social scientists and theorists. But “power” is not an easy concept to make sense of within the social sciences. It represents a cluster of concepts which seems to be very controversial.

Since there are many different ideas of power, to grasp the coherence of the concept, there has been an increasing use of two main different approaches for the concept of power (Clegg and Haugaard, 2009). One of them is “power over” approach and the other one is “power to” approach. These two different concepts form the two fundamental dimensions of power.

The use of power in organizations has long been searched by social scientists. There have been attempts to conceptualize power in organizations in different ways. This study is another attempt to investigate the role of power in organizations.

In this context, this study focuses on the power over approach, and the role of this approach on the relationships among individuals. To better understand power over, power to approach, the distinction between these two approaches and reflection of this distinction to organizational environment is also discussed.

2. THE CONCEPT OF POWER AND POWER OVER APPROACH

The literature for power over approach generally argues that power exists because of conflict of interest. So power is primarily about to overcome conflict of interest which occurs when individuals want different things and have different interests that lie in different directions. Because of conflict of interest, individuals enforce each other to do what they want (Lovett, 2007).

Power over approach emphasizes that one of the parties is able to execute more power than others. So the nature of the struggle goes on between two people is that one of them imposes her will on the other one. When there is this sort of relationship going in the part of society, individuals can chain the relationship together. They can elaborate power chains that influence the whole working other power hierarchy.

2.1. The Theoretical Development of “Power Over”

The concept of “power over” came to the fore through with Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud who argued that people have a drive towards seeking power. This drive is absolutely fundamental. According to Hobbes (1968) society is formed by individuals who carry and constitute power and in the society the main reinforcement for power is violence and coercion. In his book *Leviathan* Hobbes stated that “... in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” (Hobbes, 1968). In his statement the idea is that there is a really strong desire for power. When he was trying to explain that why there is a strong desire for power, he appeals essentially to security. According to Hobbes in the essence of nature, life is nasty and short so way out of that is power, which is official security. So people always want to see the power, they drive in power all the time. If they do not, security is compromised. If they do not, somebody else gets power. Hobbes saw power as a resource that translates between periods. Once an individual has the resource he/she can use it again in the next period. So it is not just a present day thing. When Hobbes was writing in England, there was an extremely bloody civil war between the crown and the parliament. This situation was very influential behind his ideas.

The second theorist who had a totally different sort of typological theory about power is Sigmund Freud. Freud (1931) argued that because of the way human personalities are set up, human beings quiet like dominating other people. So in this case there is a psychological basis for power. Generally Freud stressed the dark side of human psychology. In his book “Civilization and Its Discontents”, Freud argued that “since people are frightened of responsibility, they do not really want freedom and they want to supplement their identity by somebody else”. Also Freud stated that “Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures amongst whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness” (Freud, 1931). He emphasized that people really want to elude privilege. The early thing that stops them from doing that is the existence of civilization of society.

After Hobbes and Freud other power over theorists are essentially Karl Marx and early elite theorists. These theorists tend to stress that power is a resource in conflict. Marx developed a conflict perspective on how society functions and how classes cause inequality in society. In Marxism case conflict is between classes and in elite theory case, conflict is between elites and the mass (Holmes, Hughes & Julian, 2007). According to elite theorist Wright Mills “power refers to the realization of one’s will even if others resist. Like status, this has not been well indexed.” (Mills, 1956) So overcoming resistance is important and it is not really easy to measure. Most of the power and resources literature from Marx has been stated that there is an inherent social conflict to avoid, an individual can repress it or he/she can divert it. But then it shows up in some other way.

The main western power over approach which is called “pluralism” started off with Max Weber. Although pluralism is an American liberal political science main stream kind of position, the main person behind this approach is the late 19th century German sociologists and political economists Max Weber. Weber (1947) defined the concept of power over as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (Weber, 1978 cited in Lovett, 2007). Weber thought that power is based on the force and also related with the conflict of interest. According to Weber, the term “power” covers authority and coercion. Thus power can either be legitimate or based upon the threat of violence. After Weber pluralist theory has tended to conditionalize this whole thing to stress the power very much based on particular very detailed situations.

Within this framework pluralist theorist Frank Lovett (2007) stated that “The power of a person or a group, in the most general sense, is their ability, as given by particular means in a particular context, to bring about,

if desired, future states of the world” (Lovett, 2007). According to this definition, there are lots of conditions about power. The idea in pluralist theory is that things in one context may not work in another context. Main pluralist criticism for Marxist and elite theory is that they just count resources but they do not look at the applications of these resources. A very powerful person might have lots of resources. But the whole thing is about what is the person's desire. So it is a very conditionalized kind of thing.

Pluralist theorists emphasized the differences between potential and actual power. Actual power refers that the ability to force someone to do something and is the view of power as a causation. Dahl stated power as a "realistic relationship, such as A's capacity for acting in such a manner as to control B's responses." (Dahl, 1956: 13) On the other hand conservative theorist Luhmann argued that it is not just enough to cause something (Vermeer, 2006). Power is unrelated to causation. It is not something dependent on direct action. According to Luhmann "in order to know that I have to enforce you to do something I have to have some disagreement with you. I have to overcome some resistance from you. If you do what I want but I have not influenced you or if you do what I want but I did not want you to do it, I did not expect specific effort to get you to do it. Perhaps I am just lucky you just done what I want you to do because you want to do it for your own reasons". Therefore it is understood that it cannot be conceptualized as a conflict of interest.

Pluralist theorists stress many points for the concept of power. They generally stress that individuals cannot observe power that is a conflict of interest. It can be exemplified in a case like "union organizers say bosses are holding down the workers but there is no evidence that workers object to that". In such a case, pluralist view does not conceptualize this interaction as a power relationship. For pluralists individuals are not in a behavioural pattern to exert power. According to them causality is very hard to establish. Besides, they are against Marxist and Elite theorists view about resources because resources can be transferred.

This argument can be supported with an example of Rupert Murdoch¹. Although Rupert Murdoch was a very powerful media tycoon, in 2011 he faced allegations that his companies had been regularly hacking the phones of celebrities and so had to close down newspapers. In a few weeks he moved from being a very powerful person in to a much less powerful situation. This supports the idea of pluralists' view which argues power depends on the context (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Another important point that pluralists stated is that exercising power is costly. It can be said that for a power relationship there is a need for individuals to do something, otherwise power relationship cannot occur. Doing something for individuals can be offering bribe or threat to other individuals. Pluralists would deny that there is a power relationship if power exercised without these things happening.

On the other hand rational actor model have argued that in individual can sometimes have power exercising by what is on the agenda. So the emphasis of rational actor model is agenda control. Within this framework, the power of the speaker of the House of Representatives John Boehner in US Congress might be a good example. In 2013 Boehner who was from the minority party exploited an institutional provision and affected whole country. Because he got the power and he was under the pressure of his party. Under the rational actor model William Riker developed the whole concept of leadership which was based on political manipulation, preference shaping and enlarging scope of issue in order to create new opportunities for influence. As it can be seen from this rational actor model case that rational power model can be conceptualized and be seen in interpersonal relations (Riker 1962, cited in Mclean 2001).

In neo-classical economics the concept of power does not have an important role. According to economist George Stigler in the perfect competition environment power does not feature at all (Stigler, 1968). Here, the main place for the concept of power is in "monopoly power" which demonstrates bargaining strength of monopolist. The main reason that economists have tended to ignore power is that economics has traditionally seen the economy as a process in which there are only actors who are undertaking exchanges (Dowding, 2009). Almost none of them is seen to have power over others. However, with the beginning of the game theory revolution, modern economics has been studying the problems of credible commitments, agency problems, asymmetric information, collective action and public good problems which include power relations. These research areas deal with power relations either implicitly or explicitly.

In the 1960s and 70s sociologists started criticizing pluralist approach. They argued that focusing too much on conflict is misleading. Within this framework political and social theorist Steven Lukes (1975) redefined the concept of power by saying that "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests". According to Lukes power is a multidimensional social factor and there are very important non-

¹ CEO and founder of News Corporation and the creator of FOX Broadcasting

coercive sources of power. Lukes defined and conceptualized power with describing the three faces of it. This was an introducing of new dimensions, or in other saying new faces of power. According to Lukes, the first face of power can be explicitly seen and stresses that an individual who wins an argument or a fight has the power. This fits with the pluralist approach. In this face the ability to make decisions and override others is emphasized. That ability is associated with authority which can be referred as an individual has the authority and he/she can override the others. So individuals who have power have the initiative to make the decisions. The origin of the second face of power is from the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962). The second face of power stresses that individuals have real power if they can set the agenda and powerless people never got their issues considered. In this face institutions are organized in a way that only certain issues can come to the policy agenda, while other issues cannot. Because of institutional bias, some issues are the legitimate issues for the organization to address. The first two faces of power describe how power can be used to get someone to do what an individual want them to, even if it is against their own will. Conversely, the third face of power described how power can manipulate individuals' subjective interests to do something they might not actually want to do by changing their desire about what they want (Lukes, 2005).

2.2. “Power To” as a Complemental Factor of “Power Over”

From a very left wing perspective French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1976) continued criticizing pluralist approach into a very detailed discussion of everyday life. According to him there are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control or dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982 cited in Gohler 2009). He argued that power was not only repressive but also productive. If an individual do not have a degree of repression, power is very routinized and it is not just professional. So he implied that power operates as power over and power to.

These arguments lead us to power to approach which emphasizes power as a capacity for action. Mainly “power to” approach came to the fore through the work of Hannah Arendt (1970), Talcott Parsons (1964) and Barry Barnes (1988). These theorists saw power being very collective capability (Clegg and Haugaad, 2009). According to Arendt, “violence is totally excluded from public sphere where glory comes from one’s successful persuasion of others with one’s own reason and rhetorical power” (Arendt 1958 cited in Clegg and Haugaad, 2009). According to Parsons, “power is not a generalized capacity to attain goals and it is not a zero sum game which is transferable from one party to another.” (Parsons, 1963) In this context, it can be concluded what “power to” approach generally emphasizes is individuals can’t have power unless they have groups. That means individuals can’t have power just based on force. Power has to be based on collective capability. It does not require existence of a conflict of interest. According to Parsons power is a political or organizational catalyst like money. A catalyst allows the reaction between two other elements and it is not itself in the transformation process. In a system of formal money an individual can develop a range of financial products. That means individuals can do more things by means of their capabilities. So “power to” approach stresses that power allows the group to get things done which could not be done otherwise. As mentioned, here power is conceptualized with a different view and is seen like a catalyst.

2.3. The “Power Over” and “Power To” Distinction

The distinction between the concepts of “power over” and “power to” was explicitly introduced by Pitkin (1972). Pitkin stated that “One may have power over another or others and that sort of power is indeed relational (...). But he may have power to do or accomplish something all by himself and that power is not relational at all, it may involve other people if what he has power to do is a social or political action, but it need not.” Pitkin’s distinction is the starting point for further differentiation. After Pitkin the attempt to distinguish *power to* and *power over* has been central for theorists Morris (1987) and Barry (1989). According to Morris, power is a sort of ability. The main idea is that power is related with capacities to do things when chosen. Morris stresses an important distinction between what an individual could do under various conditions and what an individual can do under the conditions that actually obtain. According to Morris “the main point is not the individual’s ability to overcome a possible resistance or opposition but his or her ableness to overcome actual resistance or opposition”. He emphasizes that *power as ableness* is more important than *power as ability*. Morris argued that “A has power to do X” should be taken as instead of “A has power over B”. He also stated that every use of “power over” can be paraphrased in terms of power to, but the reverse is not possible (Barry, 1988).

In the early 1990s political scientist Nye defined the concept of hard power and soft power which seems to be related with power over and power to concepts respectively. According to Nye (2008) hard power rests on

inducements (carrots) and threats (sticks) and can be used to get others to change their positions. On the other hand soft power rests on getting the outcomes one wants by attracting others rather than manipulating their material incentives. Therefore it co-opts people rather than coerces them. In addition to these two concepts Nye also defined the smart power as the ability to combine hard and soft power into an effective strategy (Nye, 2008). According to Nye's definition, hard power seems to naturally overlaps the power over concept, and soft power seems to naturally overlaps the power to concept. However the idea that hard power is a "power over" concept and soft power is a "power to" concept can be criticised. For example, when we look at the relationship between the state and citizens, we can clearly see that state has power and it enforces citizens to pay their taxes. It forcibly collects taxes. It puts regulations to punish citizens who try to avoid taxes. So it is very clear that state uses hard power. But on the other hand state collects taxes for collective projects such as to build infrastructure, to provide health service and to support national defence. If citizens know that they are paying taxes for public goods which are in everyone's interest, the state can get them credibly to agree to contribute. So as we see in this case that moderate amount of hard power can be applied with the collective power to approach which means that in some cases hard power overlaps the power to approach.

3. POWER IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Within the framework of the contemporary perception of power, the related concepts are "authority", "legitimacy", "trust" and "influence". Authority can be defined as "the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience" (Oxford Dictionary, web). Authority is the formal distribution and the certificate that attached. With authority individuals have the right to do something legally or institutionally in the correct way. If a person has legitimacy as well, then he/she get some extra value added. The reason for this is the positive opinions of people that they are the right person to decide the action. For example if someone is elected, that person both have the authority and the legitimacy. If someone is the boss for a failing company, he/she might still have the authority but might not have the legitimacy. On the other hand, trust is to believe that somebody would do the right thing or acting in people's interest without actually having the capacity to tell one to do it. According to Luhmann trust and power are quite different in the way that they operate (Luhmann, 1979). With power individuals might be doing things in a way that they force people to comply. With trust people might be just comply because they believe in the individual in front of them. In such a case individuals do not give importance whether a person have legitimacy or not. On the other hand, influence can be defined as the soft version of power where an individual might be able to shape what others do.

Within the framework of organizational structure, the power relations can be observed inside organization. In power to view it may be that we could let the organization in a big debate that would produce some decisions or it may be that it is quicker and more effective to have a system of power to attract people who agree with whatever power holders are saying.

On this respect, the power over view is not in agreement with the power to view. Some organizations have power struggles and conflict. Because there might be more than one idea about the coordination of things in the organization. Besides, employers might have different concepts of what the coordination should look like. Within the framework of how actors are aggregated into blocks, power over view stresses that there are more power hierarchies. Some individuals may have the idea that they are more powerful than another individual and that individual can be more powerful than another person. This can be identified with a complete power chain in the organization.

On the other side, for the power to approach, power is a code. A code is just something that saves time, it is a communication. Power is seen as being something that sorts out issues, allows to resolve problems speedily. It is not strictly a fully working hierarchy. Also power to approach stresses that information is very important. So ideas, being able to look ahead, having knowledge, having expertise, building legitimacy and trust are seen important factors. Therefore it can be said that power to is much more contextual concept of power. On the other hand, power over literature tends to stress that key resources to sustain power for long periods of time are, money, motivation, personnel, force and reputation.

In power to view, the idea is that when group persuades more people to cooperate, welfare rises. In terms of pushing up the welfare, organization has a power structure in it. But in organizations although individuals have an interest to create collective benefits, there is no incentive for them to share the cost. Whenever a person might not be excluded from collective benefits, each person has a tendency to not to join the group efforts. Because who does not behave cooperatively will tend to always be better than other group members

who behave cooperatively. This is a free rider premium from stopping being cooperative and changing to being a defector. So rational and self-interested individuals have a tendency for free riding (Olson, 1965).

When power to theorists argued that power is a collective resource, they mainly argued that what the power element does is to stop everybody from doing free riding. When someone has become a free rider, the risk of free riding escalates. Power helps to coordinate between different visions. It codifies a lot of information that individuals can use. And they can make individual decisions about their own cooperation and free riding.

4. CONCLUSION

This study tries to clarify the power over approach as one of the main dimensions of power concept. Power concept in the organizational environment and the distinction between power over and power to is also explained. Besides, the aforementioned distinction is used to explain the conflicts and collective actions in organizations.

“Power over” approach emphasizes that power exists because of conflict of interest. Therefore to overcome conflict of interest, power relations are important. So power is a capacity to overcome others. It might include coercion and violence. On the other hand “power to” approach stresses that actually conflict of interest is less important in society or inside organizations. What really matter is collective action. Power is a code, a catalyst, a communication.

Power is the relation that people produce in groups. It does not base on force. Although power over and power to give a fundamental distinction, this differentiation does not provide a clear systematic understanding of power.

Taken together, in the literature there are lots of different ideas of power. Actually it is very difficult to incorporate these ideas into a common definition of power. But to grasp the coherence of the concept of power it is important to give a systematic overview of the current literature for the concept of power. In this situation, power to and power over, as the two fundamental dimensions of power is very helpful to understand the coherence of the concept of power.

Power to and power over are not competing conceptions of power. We can always tell a story about “power over” way and we can always tell a story about “power to” way. Power can be placed on either one side or the other, but there are cases in which both aspects can be united. Different people tend to appeal to different aspect of power. Evaluating the power concept in this way there may be a need for further clarification of the current literature.

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