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On power and empowerment

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This study presents a conceptual analysis of social power. The most common theories of power are social–relational, an approach instantiated in a range of contemporary experiments that give participants the chance to control other people's outcomes. The relational approach is also reflected in various analyses of international relations. In comparing and contrasting relational theories of power, I identify logical inconsistencies and shortcomings in their ability to address empowerment and reductions in inequality. In turn, I propose a new ecological conceptualization of empowerment as the state of being able to achieve one's goals and of power as stemming from a combination of the capacity of the party and the affordances of the environment. I explain how this new conceptualization can describe the main kinds of power social relations, avoid logical contradictions, and moreover, distinguish power from agency and from control. This new conceptualization of power as the possibility of meeting goals, coupled with recognizing survival as the fundamental goal of all living things, implies an absolute and not relative or relational standard for power, namely well-being. It also allows us to conceive of power in ways that help address the many social concerns that have motivated research on power.

Control and freedom. Influence and independence. Agency and commanding obedience. Dominance and rebellion. With such a range of terms that represent power – terms that are often in opposition to each other – power is clearly a complex concept. I suspect that we social psychologists who are concerned with power are most concerned about its consequences. In particular, one may be concerned with questions of power (1) because of power's link to inequality and one's concerns over the suffering that inequality produces, (2) because power may help to organize people into groups that can then achieve goals that individuals on their own cannot, (3) because the uncurbed exercise of power can be utterly destructive, (4) because the legitimacy or illegitimacy of power pertains to morality and justice, and to the stability of social relationships (5) because momentous changes in distributions of power are major events of human history, and (6) because power can entail resource consumption and exploitation, which means its use can be environmentally as well as socially unsustainable. Power is important because having (more) power or lacking sufficient power enhances or curtails the length and quality of people's lives, the functioning of communities, and the health of their environments.

Research on power does not always tackle any of these issues. An important reason that much power research is tangential to the reasons we want to understand power is that power is misconceived and poorly defined, despite a number of good efforts (Cartwright, 1959; Emerson, 1962; Kuhn, 1963; Mills, 1956; Russell, 1938; Rummel,

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1976). Another reason is that accounts and studies of power often focus more on the agency and points of view of more powerful parties, neglecting the agency and conditions of less powerful parties. Indeed, although the psychology of many highly powerful people (e.g., Hitler, Gandhi, Steve Jobs) has received much attention, very little attention is given to the lives, situations, and agency of people who are destitute. If illness is relevant to understanding health, being virtually powerless is relevant to understanding power. Theories of power that focus on comparative power do not have a way to explain how relatively low-powered people can use their agency, capacities, and affordances to reduce social inequality. Also, because our theories do not adequately address what power is for, they do not adequately address empowerment. This study provides a conceptual analysis of human power with the aim of providing concepts that can better enable us to address inequality and empowerment.

Conceptual analysis enables us to consider the meaning of empirical studies in relation to theory (Fiedler, 2004). I start with a glimpse of how contemporary research operationalizes power to illustrate the shortfalls described above. Conceptual analysis also identifies theories' stated and unstated assumptions. This allows insight into the degree that these assumptions are necessary, sufficient, redundant, or contradictory. It also identifies boundary conditions for theories (Fiedler, 2004; Machado & Silva, 2007). Because social–relational power is the most predominant approach to power, I then explicate the varieties of relational power and compare and contrast them. This will show that power can be harmful or helpful, that parties have goals that can be in concert or in competition, and that parties can have different priorities. However, this conceptual exploration identifies logical contradictions in these conceptions of power and questions about power that relational conceptions cannot address. To address these conceptual problems, I reframe agency and power in terms of goals and how thoroughly they can be met by the parties' capacities and the affordances provided by the context they inhabit. After reviewing how this new conceptualization can be used to describe predominant forms of relational power, I explain how it also allows new ways to understand social organizations, social change, justice, and how to increase empowerment and reduce inequalities.

Contemporary research on power

The predominant view of power is that it is not a property of a thing or of an agent, but rather is a property of a social relationship (see Fiske & Berdahl, 2007, for a review) or emergent from social interaction (Hogg, 2001). From the vantage point of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), also called social exchange theory (Molm, 1997), a party ('P+') has power over another ('P−') in their relationship if P− needs things from P+ that P− cannot get elsewhere. This dependence may be mutual, in which case they both have power over the other (they are interdependent), and presumably are in the relationship to 'exchange' needs-satisfaction. In this case, neither should have the upper hand in negotiating the terms of their relationship. However, dependence may also be asymmetric, giving the less dependent party a potential advantage. Because context is not static (e.g., people's desires, options, and understandings of their own identities and those of others, change), and because needs are not static, power relations are not static. Moreover, a given party can have different relative power within each of that party's dyadic relationships. However, restricted access to things one needs from outside the relationship makes one more dependent on the other within the dyadic relationship.

From my point of view, research might have used this approach to consider what makes a party sufficiently empowered (i.e., able to satisfy its needs), by examining how the party's capacities and the party's environment jointly afford meeting needs. The general problem for living would be, 'How can I/we get what I/we need?' and the solutions will involve knowing one's needs, and figuring out how one's capacities can work with what the environment affords (Pratto, Lee, Tan, & Pitpitan, 2011). However, most research on interdependence theory has instead focused either on individuals in dyads and the comparative power within the dyad (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996, for a review) or on dominance in international relations (Gartzke, Li, & Boehmer, 2001; O'Neal, O'Neal, Maoz, & Russet, 1996; Waltz, 1988). In fact, the choices and opportunities that the context provides have received such little overt acknowledgement that it is now common to define power simply in terms of the ability to control *another's* outcomes (Fiske, 1993).

There are other serious criticisms of this conceptualization of power. Some people have argued that there are other kinds of relationships involving power over another person that do not involve dominance. Caring for others is a kind of power over others in that it influences their outcomes by addressing their needs, but it need not be dominating or harmful (Pratto & Walker, 2000). In fact, Clark and Mills (2012) reject the idea that all relationships are essentially exchanges by arguing that close, personal relationships have different 'rules'. Specifically, the point of communal relationships is to meet the others' needs. However, most work on communal relationships addresses those of romantic partners and not elder–younger care in which there are usually asymmetries in meeting needs of the other (Pratto & Walker, 2000).

Another criticism of viewing power as outcome control due to dependency is that it is read by some scholars as removing the agency of the dependent (Simon & Oakes, 2006). Indeed, and building on this critique, those associated with the social identity approach (Simon & Oakes, 2006) emphasize that, due to human agency, social relationships are fluid (e.g., group boundaries and the meaning of social identities are changeable). Further, the social identity approach assumes that groups can become more powerful by working together, not simply by dominating another group (Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005). Indeed, the social identity approach allows for more constructive conceptualizations of how social relations relate to power, such as those concerning leadership or those between complementary groups with a higher-order purpose, such as departments in corporations (Hogg, 2001; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Steffens, Haslam, Ryan, & Kessler, 2013). All this suggests that assuming that social power means 'power over' (another person's behaviour, choices, or outcomes, as presumed by interdependence theory and its derivatives) has problems. However, before I examine the relational conception of power in more detail, I will sample what contemporary research on power seems to suggest about its conceptualization.

How do social psychologists research power?

Must power be harmful?

Historically and currently, much research and theory addresses how unequal power produces social harm. To test how power can produce injustice, experimenters have put participants in situations in which they have a choice over whether to perform behaviour that is often viewed as unethical, such as dividing resources unequally (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991, Study 2; Anderson & Berdahl, 2002, Study 1), cheating (Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013), and taking advantage of subordinated people (Son Hing,

Bobocel, Zanna, & McBride, 2007). Studies of naturalistic dominance concentrate on particular dominative behaviours such as sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997), domestic abuse (Coulter, Kuehnle, Byers, & Alfonso, 1999), contemporary enslavement (Van Den Anker, 2004), and terrorism (Crenshaw, 1981). These latter phenomena especially make obvious that dominative relationships can produce severe injury and death.

Yet, other research is less focused on dominative relationships. When potential benefits are more anticipated than are potential harms, researchers often call power 'influence' (Raven, 1992). To study power/influence, some experiments provide one participant with the authority or opportunity to provide material rewards or punishments to another (e.g., money, experimental credits). For example, Anderson and Berdahl (2002, Study 1) allowed one of two participants to decide how to split $10 between them. Experimenters have also established each party's scope of influence by having participants play roles with relative rank such as committee chair versus committee member (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002, Study 2), and supervisor or production worker (e.g., Fast, Sivinathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012, Experiment 5). Some experiments combine the role-playing method with the ability to reward another and/or oneself (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003, Experiment 1) as a different way of instantiating outcome control.

Who do we study?

Another aspect of power research is whether studies focus more on the advantaged or on the disadvantaged parties as agents. The experiments just described highlight how the advantaged party influences the disadvantaged party. Similarly, worker surveys often ask participants what kinds of influence tactics authorities use and how effective those tactics are on underlings (Pierro, Raven, Amato, & Bélanger, 2013). Steffens, Haslam, and Reicher (2014) randomly assigned confederate basketball team captains to express high or low confidence in their team's performance prospects and measured the confidence each team member had in the team and their additive performance. In such studies, the research positions 'superior' parties as the agents who affect subordinate parties. This is one way in which the agency of advantaged parties receives more attention in research than the agency of disadvantaged parties.

However, it is not necessary to ignore the agency of the disadvantaged in order to study asymmetric influence. Experimenters can provide choices to both parties, measure both parties' actions, and examine the consequences of both parties' actions. For example, Olekalns and Smith (2009) told participants who were role-playing a job applicant and an employer in a hiring negotiation situation either that there were lots of other jobs or lots of other potential employees available. Similarly, in experiments on price setting, 'low exit' is represented by a buyer having no alternative sellers, or a seller having no alternative buyers (Narasimhan, Nair, Griffith, Arlbjorn, & Bendoly, 2009). Both parties are subject to more influence by the other when they have little 'exit power.' Such studies make the choices, and therefore the *agency*, that both parties have rather more obvious.

Some research methods illustrate the interactions between parties in their methods. For example, contemporary workplace surveys examine workers' organizational effort and commitment in response to aspects of their relationships with leaders, such as when their leaders have special relationships with only some employees (Chen, Yu, & Son, 2014; Harris, Li, & Kirkman, 2014). Assuming that leading and following are co-constructed, Steffens *et al.* (2013) experimentally manipulated the qualities of leaders to

measure what qualities allow leaders to lead – to set norms for the group and be good role models (Steffens *et al.*, 2013). The advent of the actor–partner interdependence model (Kenny & Garcia, 2012) and other multi-level models (Gaertner & Packer, 2015) has subverted the assumption that the basic social relations unit is a superior/inferior pair. In other words, conceptualizing influence as multi-directional leads people to use research methods appropriate to that assumption.

An extremely popular method to instantiate 'power' is through priming participants with the participants' own concepts of power. This can be done implicitly by using the sentence unscrambling task with words the researchers assume connote high or low power embedded in the stimuli (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001, Experiment 1; Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008, Experiment 2). Other experiments explicitly induce a sense of being powerful or powerless through asking participants to write about a time when they had power over another, or another held power over them (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky *et al.*, 2003, Experiment 2). Ecological cues have also been used to instantiate a sense of individual power, including holding an expansive versus restricted body posture (Yap *et al.*, 2013) and sitting in a professor's office chair versus the guest chair in a professor's office (Chen *et al.*, 2001, Experiment 2). However, the measures and conditions with these methods do not tell us whether participants' conceptions of power correspond to any of *our* theoretical conceptions of power. So let me return to our theories.

Varieties of relational power

Conceptually, I see relational power as taking four general forms: (1) dominative, in which one party attempts to realize its own goals by subverting another party's goals, (2) affiliative, which is influence through relationships with others who have compatible goals, (3) positional, which entails influencing others through virtue of position, rank, or role, and (4) transformative, in which a party with greater capacity helps another party to expand the latter's capacity. Throughout the section on each form of relational power, I will note what each conception of power implies about inequality. This critical discussion of relational power will also identify logical problems and some unanswerable and unanswered questions that need to be addressed, and I will illustrate these in a subsequent section where I address what may at first sight seem a strange question: How does my power compare to that of Montezuma? But, first, let us consider the four forms of relational power.

Power over: Dominative power

Crudely, one might think that power means having control over another party's actions (Simon, 1957). The problem with this definition is that no one can make anyone do anything. Rather, one can only prevent others from taking physical action by using physical constraint and/or physical harm (i.e., force; Wartenberg, 1991, p. 93). A different definition of dominating power is the ability to get another party to do something against its interests (Kuhn, 1963; Rummel, 1976). This definition raises the question of who decides what a party's interests are. A third definition is that power is what allows one to get another party to do something that party would not otherwise do, in response to actual punishment (harm) or threats of harm (Dahl, 1957; Schermerhorn, 1961). This is coercion, a narrower understanding of power than many theorists wish, and this

definition also raises the question of how we know what someone would not do. Coercion is a way of co-opting the other's agency as if it were one's own. This is why it seems controlling. The converse of being dominated has also been described as having power. In these views, power not only involves having agency, but freedom of choice (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). For example, freedom in interdependence theory can arise because one is free to exit the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

The concept of dominative power has three important implications for inequality. First, inequality in parties' freedom is one kind of power inequality, but it is not usually the same kind of inequality we mean when we refer to social inequality. Indicators of social inequality can be measured in some concrete metric. Social inequality indicators might be tangible, such as material wealth, or consensually subjective, such as social reputation, but they are measurable in the 'here and now'. In contrast, freedom of choice is a state of potential; it concerns possible futures.

Second, we have theories suggesting that people will often resist domination. For example, self-determination theory holds that people deeply and implicitly desire self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1980), and reactance theory predicts that people will typically react against the sense they are being controlled (Brehm, 1966). According to social dominance theory, even relatively stable intergroup dominance and oppression are the product of power struggles between groups, and can be the state of a dynamic system (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). International relations, similarly, are said to be a chronic power contest for superiority (Waltz, 1988). Thus, in general, it seems we should expect some resistance to domination. Moreover, power struggles do change power relationships. The nations, global regions, and empires that were predominant 100 years ago are not the same as those that are now, and the distribution of various kinds of power (e.g., military, economic, and autonomy) among nations is also not comparable (Lebow & Valentino, 2009; Mann, 2012). If dominative power is chronically contested, then dominance now does not inevitably lead to future dominance. Importantly for our discussion of the relation between power and inequality, we need a means of understanding how social transactions that change power in some way might lead to more *or* to less social inequality (see Pratto, Stewart, & Bou Zeinnedine, 2013, for an extended discussion).

Power with: Affiliative power

Affiliative relationships are viewed as producing far less harm for the parties involved than dominative relationships. However, they are not all egalitarian and they may not benefit parties outside the relationship in question.

One type of affiliative power is power via association. Associating with other parties may afford benefits such as gaining others' approval, praise, knowledge, goods, tools, toys, protection, and a way to demonstrate one's own knowledge, trustworthiness and generosity. The Interpersonal Influence Model (IPIM; French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1992) delineates a set of desired resources (e.g., expertise, affection) and assumes that these are not finite. For example, if a new, respectable person affiliates with a high-status person, this may bring greater regard to both. That is, unlike dominative relationships, associative relationships are not zero-sum.

A second type of affiliative power involves alliance, in which people implicitly understand which other groups (or individuals) are allies of their own group (or themselves). In international relations, allies most often have economic interdependence and are physically close, producing common goals (Lai & Reiter, 2000). According to

image theory, people view other groups as (and treat them as) allies if they (1) perceive that another group's goals are compatible with their own, and both groups (2) have equal capacities and (3) have equal cultural status (Herrmann & Fischerkeller, 1995). In turn, changes in any of these three dimensions (goal compatibility, comparative power or capacity, and comparative status) impact upon the images of the other. For example, U.S. Black teenagers have been found to view White Americans predominantly as 'imperialists' because they view Whites as having superior power, status, and incompatible goals, and U.S. White teenagers view Blacks more as 'enemies' – equals who have incompatible goals as they themselves have (Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005). Where neither party is subject to disproportionate influence from the other alliance is possible and alliance positively influences all the involved parties' outcomes, but is not dominative, zero-sum, nor controlling. Formal allies such as business partners and nations in treaty organizations even formalize their joint goals and their obligations to influence the other.

A third kind of affiliative power relies on the formation of a common identity with other groups (e.g., Ukrainian Russian speakers with Russians) and/or with their goals. There are three literatures that fit the definition of common identity power. Some social identity theorists state that power is the ability to recruit (others') agency to help fulfil one's goals (e.g., liberation; Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005). Analyses of close relationships argue that the blending of other and self-identity in intimate relationships promotes cooperation towards common goals, including a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1996) and self-expansion (Aron *et al.*, 1991). Finally, the common ingroup identity model argues that when people begin to identify with outgroups, they become less likely to stereotype others as not deserving of power, and also less likely to monopolize resources and otherwise curtail the others' power (see Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993, for a review). Unlike alliance, common identity power allows for relationships between both unequal and equal capacity parties. A good leader inspires followers to adopt and work towards a common agenda (Fransen *et al.*, 2015). Common identity power can also be distinguished from affiliative power in the nature and level of entanglement of the relationship.

Cooperative behaviours need not depend on common identities nor on common goals – only on compatible goals (Axelrod, 1984). Indeed, a fourth, *coincidental* kind of affiliative power only requires that there is a joint means to achieve different goals that each party has. For example, members of the UN Security Council have voted in favour of sanctions against other countries for different reasons (Nelson, 2005). Mutually desired exchanges, including political bribery, buying and selling, agricultural subsidies, or giving unwanted things to charity, are all cooperative, but they fulfil separate goals for the parties involved. It is important to note that the cooperative variant of affiliative power can exist between those who are equal and also between those who are unequal.

Affiliative relationships can also perpetuate inequality. From the interdependence perspective on power, other parties and the things they have can be viewed as assets or as conduits to assets in associative, common identity, and alliance relationships. In turn, having indirect access to such resources increases others' desire to affiliate with one. For example, small nations associated with big nations receive secondary protection. Individuals might want to get to know friends of friends. Essentially, those with more get more, unless what they share with others is not zero-sum (e.g., friends) or the parties make concerted efforts to use affiliation to reduce inequality. Thus, affiliative relationships can help account for the perpetuation of inequality even in the absence of domination.

Power in: Positional power

Positional power stems from holding social positions, such as rank, status, leader, or authority role (even temporary ones such as 'card dealer'). Positions entail a mutually known and complementary set of social identities such as dealer/player, leader/follower, community organization/member. There are instances in which these relational positions are formally specified, as is the case with constitutional governments, employers, and labour laws. Official leaders and bodies make decisions, allocate resources, and/or determine agendas on behalf of others. In contrast to the common identity notion that power means recruiting others' agency, positional authority obviates (at least partly) the agency of non-superiors.

Relational positions, and those who come to occupy them, can also emerge through social interactions, politics, and use of power. In the Sherif and Sherif (1953) studies of boys who were initially strangers at summer camp, within each camp group, a boy emerged as a leader and the other boys expected their leader to confer with the leader of the other group when it was time to make peace. In an early, detailed network analysis of opinion spread, French (1956) theorized that over time, because any potential pair of people could influence the others, as opinion norms spread, the person whose position in this social network had the most potential influence would *emerge* as leader. In some circumstances, hegemons emerge in international relations (see Snidal, 1985, for a conceptual analysis of hegemonic stability theory).

According to French and Raven (1959), authority is 'legitimate power' to the target of influence and stems from the internalized values that P_1 has a legitimate right to influence P_2 and that P_2 has an obligation to accept this influence. However, the question of whether authoritative power is accepted as legitimate is disputed. Studies of how people resist domination suggest that although subordinated people can acknowledge that others have authority, this does not mean that they accept it as legitimate. Further, they do not cede their agency to those in positions of authority or to those who are dominating them (Scott, 1985). Rather, they retain their agency to avoid what poor outcomes they can, subvert methods of dominance, and identify niches in the apparent social order to realize what goals and needs they can. This argues against the notion that recognizing authority means respecting or internalizing it (French & Raven, 1959). The fact that there is everyday resistance by people whose lives are subject to considerable outside influence demonstrates that acknowledging someone is influenced does not imply that they have no agency. People have agency and use it, whether or not they hide it, and whether or not they are successful in overthrowing their domination.

Empowering others: Transformational power

Transformational power contrasts with the prior forms of relational power because it does not make the assumption that actors are primarily self-interested. Transformative relationships are unequal, but their purpose is to reduce inequality through development. Parents, mentors, teachers, and therapists are to have a trusting relationship with a less functional person who they are helping to 'grow'. Ostensibly, international development projects have this aim too, although many studies show that foreign aid creates corruption, political repression, and dependency (Coyne & Ryan, 2009; Erbeznik, 2011). Wartenberg (1991) argues that in transformational relationships too, one party does have power over the other. However, a transformative relationship is not dominative, nor is it about restricting the other's freedom or having greater influence. In contrast to the concept of power as recruiting others' agency in the service of one's own or joint goals

(Simon & Oakes, 2006), transformational power involves offering one's agency towards someone *else's* well-being and development. If the relationship produces the intended effects, it results in more equality between the parties involved, but not via capacity reduction.

Problems with relational conceptions of power

This explication of the four types of power relations revealed two dimensions that underlie them. The first dimension is whether the parties' goals are compatible rather than at odds. On the whole, goals are compatible for affiliative and transformative relationships and at odds for dominative relationships. For positional relationships, there is no general state of goal compatibility; for example, teammates have compatible goals vis-à-vis winning, but adversaries do not. The second dimension is how much each party's goals are prioritized vis-à-vis the others. Dominative relationships and transformative relationships both have unequal priorities for the parties involved, so what distinguishes them is goal competition or compatibility. Affiliative relationships are characterized by attempts to satisfy all goals through the same means. In common identity relations and alliances, the goals are shared. Positional relationships may have shared, compatible, or competing goals, but there are norms (which may be contested) about whose goals are prioritized for each.

However, there is an issue that reveals that these ways of describing *relational* power are not sufficient to capture all the features of power. I will illustrate this with a question and then explain the implications of this inadequacy.

Do I have more power than Montezuma? One could certainly argue that I do not. I have a far smaller span of authority, a far smaller scope of influence both contemporaneous and with regard to how much we each influence human history. Relative to each of our compatriots, he was wealthier than I am. He also owned much more gold and silver than I do. He was also substantially more coercive than I am. But one could argue that I am more powerful than Montezuma because at the moment, still being alive, I have more capacity to realize goals than he does. Unless I die soon, I will have a longer life than he had, although his name will be far more immortal than mine will be, so he will be a more influential teacher. At present (I hope), I am a more attractive person with whom to affiliate, but many more people wanted either to affiliate with or to avoid Montezuma during his life than will care whether they have a relationship with me. Regarding whether his riches enabled him to do more than my riches enable me to do is impossible to say. He could hire an army; I can fly in airplanes and listen to Mozart and Verdi.

I have described all manner of ways by which you might gauge my power and Montezuma's. One conundrum inherent in relational approaches to power is that you cannot even make the judgment of whether Montezuma or I have more power unless Montezuma and I have a relationship. Simply put, none of the relational types of power describe my power in relationship to Montezuma because we do not really have any relationship.

A further difficulty of making meaningful comparisons between my own and Montezuma's power (even within our separate fields) is that the political, natural, economic, technological, and social aspects of our contexts are essential to measuring any of the markers of power I have just enumerated. Although Montezuma had more potential to coerce and exploit, more important affiliation to offer, and more relative power and more authority in his society than I do in mine, the reason I can fly and he could not is

because I live after the invention of artificial flight. Our capacities and our relationships to other people have nothing to do with this difference. Rather, what does matter is what behaviours our environments, Montezuma's, and mine, afford.

In considering both the interdependence and social identity perspectives on power, I find two more conundra. The second stems from the transformational case of total dependence of one party on another party who is committed to providing all of the other party's needs. If the needier one, such as an infant, very sick person, or nation decimated by disaster, lacks necessities except those received from the other party, the ultra-needy one is completely unable to exit. This is not just due to its inability to meet goals independently, but due to severe limitations on the very needy party's capacity to meet its goals. From the examples, it should be clear that such limits may not only be due to the needy party's taxed capacities and/or limited abilities, but are also due to contextual deficits. From the interdependence theory view of power as stemming from freedom to choose to exit, the ultra-needy party has no power. Yet, so long as there is a party committed to enabling the other to recover, it is the ultra-needy party whose goals are prioritized, which is the mark of higher power in dominative relationships. Which is it? Who has more power?

Consider now how to understand the power of the providing party. Given commitment, the providing party *also* cannot exit. Thus, the neediest and the provider could be said to have equal relational power since the former cannot and the latter will not exit. Yet externally, the provider has and/or can obtain resources that the neediest party cannot. The provider has far more relative power. Again, the point is that this case of high commitment to highly needy parties does not fit easily the analytic framework provided by the interdependence perspective.

Here is the third conundrum. Interdependence theory implies that the more attractive choices a party has, the more freedom of action that party has (Keltner *et al.*, 2003). From this perspective, absolute autonomy – the state of lacking any dependence – could be considered the highest level of power. That is, freedom is relational (Grant, 2013). However, being completely independent, free of the constraints or obligations due to relationships, also implies *limitations* because it probably means one cannot have power through others (Simon & Oakes, 2006; Turner, 2005). How could power be both what one can gain through relationships and be being free of relationships?

Let me return to my 'Montezuma and me' question to identify another limitation in the conceptions of relational power. If one *could* answer the question of whether I am more or less powerful than Montezuma, then one of us would have more power relative to the other. And if this is the case, then we need to be able to quantify power without resorting to power over, power through, power with, power in position (i.e., one of the four basic kinds of power relationships). All of this means that we need an independent standard by which to measure a party's power.

Being empowered means one's goals can be fulfilled

I therefore make the radical proposal that power should not be defined in terms of social relations. Avoiding defining power as a social relation enables us to avoid the conundra and limitations previously identified. First, we avoid the logical contradiction that power is supposed to be both freedom not to be in relationships and something to be gained through relationships. Second, we have a sensible way to address the relative power of parties that do not share the same social field, such as Montezuma and myself. Third, we

avoid the difficulties associated with the social–relational way of describing relationships with high dependence in one party and high commitment in the other. Instead, we will have a meaningful standard for gauging power from the perspective of each party.

Here is a simple alternative vocabulary for understanding power. I assume that everyone has agency, that is, the ability to act. Given that groups and corporations can also act, this framing can apply to individual, group, or corporate parties. Because I also assume that actions produce consequences, no matter how small, everyone (every party) is an agent. Although having agency does not differentiate actors, what can vary between parties is the set of possible actions each has at a given moment. The set of possible actions depends conjointly on both the context and the capacities of the agent (Willis & Guinote, 2011). This implies that each actor has a set of choices in any given moment of what actions to take, or not take.

The quality of one's choice set is produced by the ease of performing actions whose performance is desirable, whose likely consequences are desirable, and the number and variety of such actions in some given time frame. In general, parties do not each have the same choice sets, and any given party's choice set and quality of choice set can vary across time and context. Many kinds of social inequality are indicated by differences in the quality of people's choice sets.

Everyone also has a set of goals that can also vary in time and be conscious or non-conscious (Aarts, 2007). To be empowered means to be in a state in which one's goals can be fulfilled. One's degree of empowerment depends jointly on the affordances of one's ecology and one's capacities in relation to one's goals. Hence, agency – the ability to act – is not the same as power. One can act (or have agency) without being able to fulfil one's goals – to be empowered – because of deficiencies in one's context, capacities, or their relation. One's degree of empowerment is variable across agents, time, and location. One's degree of agency is universal, singular, and constant.

Reframing agency, power, and varieties of relational power

Using this alternative perspective, I can describe the four types of relational power we visited previously. A *dominative* power relationship is one in which one (dominating) party ('P+') accomplishes its goals at the expense of the other (subordinated) party ('P−'), by curtailing the ability of P− to realize its goals. Such domination can be accomplished through coercion, punishment, expropriation, arbitrage, violence, and co-optation (Jackman, 1994; Molm, 1997; Raven, 1992). Because P+ is curtailing P−'s goal attainment, domination is not just a case of P+ being comparatively more empowered than P−. Coercion works by making the action the coercer wants the coerced party to take to be the least undesirable choice the coerced party has. Punishment and violence constitute overt harm and are often done to curb a party's ability and desire to pursue goals. Expropriation and arbitrage involve taking resources that are needed to achieve another's goals, and co-optation redirects another party's efforts or agency towards the co-opter's goals.

In *associative* relationships, P_1 attempts to accomplish P_1's goals via P_2, but P_2 has separate goals which may be accomplished without P_1. In contrast, common identity relationships share goals and both parties provide capacity for achieving them singly and/or jointly. Alliances contrast with dominative relationships in that alliance furthers *both* parties' goals rather than furthering one party's goals at the expense of the others. In alliances, but not in associative relationships, the parties have equal capacity.

Different parties in a *positional* relationship can have separate goals. If certain positions are rarer than others (e.g., leaders, authorities, card dealers), then any particular

party in a complementary position is less crucial to satisfying the position-related goals of the one occupying the rarer position. A boss needs employees, but each employee can often be replaced with a different person. An employee who needs something from *his or her* boss, though, cannot go to *any* boss.

Finally, the purpose of *transformational* relationships is for the more developed P to help the less developed P to develop capacity, to be able to set and achieve useful goals. The more developed P is not trying to oppose or override the agency, goals, and capacity of the less developed P, but rather, to nurture and increase those. Both Ps implicitly or explicitly have a common goal of development for the less developed P, and the more developed P's agency also serves that goal.

Rediscovering the ecology and what power is for

I have just proposed that we understand one's degree of empowerment in reference to one's own goals, rather than in reference to another party. Earlier, I also stated that the relationship between the affordances of one's ecology and one's capacities is what determines one's abilities to fulfil one's goals. I have mentioned that both the interdependence and social identity traditions view other people as human assets and sometimes as sources of risk. In considering whether Montezuma has more power than I have, we saw that airplanes and armies and gold are possible assets, and possible sources of risk (e.g., having gold was also a risk to the Aztecs because of the harmful methods the conquistadores were willing to use in pursuit of gold). Clearly, then, we need to include the natural, social, economic, and community aspects of ecologies in defining power. In fact, I assert that we cannot define power without incorporating ecology nor without addressing what power is for.

A new, non-social–relational definition of power

In discussing dominative relationships, we saw that parties' goals can be at odds. A virtue of defining empowerment from the perspective of a particular party's goals is that we do not have to argue over whether things that harm some people might still be an overall good use of power (which is a classic legitimizing ideology). For instance, we do not have to decide whether global hegemony is better or worse (for the world overall) because we can study how it enriches or impoverishes, endangers, or protects, people in different nations and situations. By specifying the implications of each kind of action for each party's well-being, and paying research attention to it, we avoid the implicit presumption of whose point of view and well-being should get the most attention, or whose should be presumed to be typical of others'.

Taking each party's viewpoint and considering whether power is harmful or helpful, I define *constructive* power as *that which allows the goals of a party to be fulfilled* and *destructive* power as *that which prevents the goals of a party from being fulfilled*. I have deliberately defined power using the language 'that which allows' and 'that which prevents' rather than 'having (or not having) the ability' to emphasize that I am not defining constructive and destructive power as stemming only from a capacity of the party. The ability to fulfil goals does not reside in the party in question. A skilled stonemason cannot build stone walls without stones. Rather, the possibility of goal fulfilment depends on the relationship between a party's capacity and the degree that the party's environment affords using that capacity to satisfy goal fulfilment (constructive

power) or to prevent goal attainment (destructive power). The extent of a party's empowerment or disempowerment depends on how much the capacities of a party and the affordances (or hindrances) of the context *taken together* are sufficient for satisfying goals. Rocks that are too heavy to lift do not afford making a wall, unless the carrying capacity of the stonemason increases to match the weight of the rocks, or the rocks are broken to match the carrying capacity of the stonemason. But note that kind of mismatch of capacity and affordance is not deliberately destructive, the way stealing the stones or disabling the mason would be.

Power and well-being

These new definitions and frameworks allow us to describe the quality of people's lives and consider how those with the most unmet needs could become more empowered. Note that both constructive power and destructive power are defined as states of particular possibilities, not traits of an actor. Note, too, that some goals are more fundamental than others. The most basic goal that all living things share is to stay alive or some would say, to reproduce, which entails being alive for a while. Power is necessary for the fundamental goal of meeting one's survival needs, as well as those of one's children. To the extent that one struggles to, or only infrequently can, meet one's survival needs, one's well-being is hampered. Being empowered, then, is necessary to survival and thriving. At root, power is for meeting survival needs.

Power and desperation

Drawing attention to people with very little power, rather than very much power, opens up the social phenomena that psychology can address beyond inequality and can reframe some issues in intergroup relations. Indeed, if we are not to ignore much of human experience, we might recognize that deprivation is the state of life for many people. As one example, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization reports that there are 805 million people who are chronically undernourished (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2014). Acknowledging that being low in power does not mean being low in agency encourages us to remember that poor and endangered people do make choices to try to increase the quality and security of their lives. Large numbers of people migrate in order to enter ecologies they think will have better economic opportunities, less violence, more tolerance, and more natural resources (International Labor Organization, International Organization for Migration, & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2001).

Considering the necessities of survival and what assets few or many people have, we can predict the particular domains in which inequality and its consequences are likely to arise. When people are deprived of physical security, social legitimacy, and material resources, the last asset that they can try to use to obtain such necessities is their bodies. They may have few choices but to labour for subsistence wages, in enslaved positions, or to trade sexual access in order to survive. For example, when women are prevented from independent access to economic resources, including food, some enter into unwanted sexual relationships or marriage, which can put them at risk for sexually transmitted disease and violence (Duffy, 2005; Katherwera-Banda *et al.*, 2005; Predborska, 2005). Partly as a result of such desperate transactions, HIV has 'trickled down' to be most prevalent among the poorest and most marginalized groups within nations and in nations with the least means of meeting basic survival needs (Pellowski, Kalichman, Matthews, &

Adler, 2013; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Tan, Earnshaw, Pratto, Kalichman, & Rosenberg, 2014; Wagstaff, Bredenkamp, & Buisman, 2014).

Deprivation and wealth are ecological, not just personal; communities and nations that have deficits or surpluses in means to satisfy one survival need, such as food quality, tend to be those with the most or fewest threats to survival, such as lethal violence (Fund for Peace, 2014). Prior power theories, notably interdependence theory, spell out that one way power tends to be concentrated and produce somewhat stable dominance is by those using what they have to get more. My approach also emphasizes that one process by which quality of life and need-fulfilment or need-deprivation come to be correlated within individuals and between communities is by those whose ecology provides so few good choices that they end up sacrificing what they have to try to provide for immediate needs (Pratto *et al.*, 2011; see Pratto, Pearson, Lee, & Saguy, 2008, for experimental evidence).

Implications of power as empowerment

Why power is social

Instead of defining power relationally, that is, as influence or control over another party attributable to being able to provide or prevent that party's access to things it desires, I argue that we should define power as what addresses one's abilities to meet one's goals. I have also highlighted that the most fundamental goal living things have is to survive. Nonetheless, this non-socially relative standard does address social relations in three ways. First, other people and communities are essential aspects of one's ecology. In fact, one of humans' survival needs is to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1996), which requires there to be a healthy community in which to be accepted. Second, people largely augment or lose or exchange the particular bases of power – the means of meeting needs that they have (e.g., food supplies, legitimacy) or of hampering other people's needs (e.g., with violence) – into other means of fulfilling different needs (e.g., knowledge) by engaging in social transactions. Moral beliefs and social customs influence how public and easy it is to use one kind of need-fulfilment to obtain others through social transactions. Social interactions and transactions are the location at which power is changed from one form to another. Third, people can often anticipate what other people want and need because there are universal needs. The suppositions people make and the perceptions they have of others are significant in how they transact power transformations. As illustrated above with respect to environmental economic deficits leading to risky sexual transactions leading to ill health (and so on), the immediacy of needs is one key parameter for understanding how transactions augment, transfer, or diminish various particular kinds of power.

Why power relationships are dynamic

At root, then, power is for survival. As such, it is essential to everyone, not just to elites, not just to destitute people, not just to aspirants, but to everyone. People's possibilities of fulfilling their goals depend much on their social context, as well as on what they imagine is possible, and what other people tolerate or prevent in realizing others' goals. All actors within a field are political actors and part of the context for others.

The power as empowerment approach provides the fundamental reason why social relationships are dynamic – changing in time. People have recurrent short-term and long-term needs, and fulfilling those needs will therefore be a chronic goal. As people act on those goals, they will alter their ecology, interact with others, hopefully obtain necessities,

and in doing so, change their social fields on an ongoing basis. Often when one way of meeting a need is too risky or expensive or is blocked, people invent new means of meeting a need. Any theory might allow for such change-actions to occur, but to say why they will always change, one needs to posit a motivation for acting. I argue that the very reason social ecologies and social relationships are and will always be in flux is rooted in the universal motivation to survive.

The parameters of power dynamics

Focusing on survival needs provides us with specific parameters with which to gauge social transactions and societal and intersocietal changes. When we enumerate basic necessities for survival, then we have also enumerated the likely sites of social transaction and potential conflict. Enumerating basic necessities also suggests useful measures of an ecology's affordances and of its inhabitants' capacities, and where shortages may fall. Particular shortages may become the focus of efforts at compensation or improvement and/or be the features that push people to migrate to a different context.

Another important parameter that other approaches have not considered, but which comes into view when one focuses on survival, is the length of the timescale associated with particular needs. To breathe, to eat, to socialize, to rest, to be cared for, to build a meaningful civilization – each of these has a different critical timescale. This does not mean that people have to work on them in different timescales – perhaps building a meaningful civilization and maintaining it will suffice to meet all these needs. But timescale does indicate how long deprivation in meeting particular survival needs can last to cause serious harm or death.

Conclusion

Power is most certainly a centrally important social phenomena. It is linked with inequality, injustice, well-being, deprivation, historical and political dynamics, social organization, humans' relationships with one another and with the natural ecology, and the quality of people's lives. Most theories of power in use in social psychology are social–relational, focusing on rewards or punishments threatened to other parties, or on authority, or on identity. My conceptual analysis of these theories identified logical contradictions and gaps in these definitions of power.

As an alternative, I proposed a non-social–relational approach to power that emphasized empowerment: The state of being able to meet one's goals. This ability is a joint function of the party's capabilities and the hindrances or affordances of the party's local field or ecology. I explained how the recognizable forms of power relationships: Dominative, affiliative, positional, and transformational, can be described using the new framework. This framework makes it obvious that agency – the ability to act – is not the same as one's level of power.

My approach can address other important power topics, and these may be fruitful domains for new research and further theory development. The empowerment approach provides a clear general way to gauge people's life conditions: Their level of well-being and the quality of people's choice sets. These things matter to people for themselves, regardless of how they compare with others' experiences. One can expect people to develop patterns of transactions, and formal or informal social, economic, and political organizations, at exactly the points in which people want to use one kind of way of

fulfilling a particular need (e.g., health care) with another (e.g., material resources, social obligations). A considerable number of senses of justice (perhaps even all) serve to address what kind of transactions are fair. Further, I have identified the fundamental reason that social relationships and indeed whole social systems will be in a state of flux. Because people must chronically meet survival needs in a changing world inhabited by other actors, the acuteness of their needs, their ideas of how to meet those needs, and the extent that others help or hinder meeting their needs produce societies and super-societies that are dynamic social and physical ecologies, alive with striving for life.

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