Positive Power: Mapping the Dimensions of Constructive Power Relations

Peter T. Coleman

*International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution*

Teachers College, Columbia University

and

Dean Tjosvold

Department of Management

Lingnan University

Tuen Mun, HONG KONG
Abstract

Traditional approaches to the study of power have emphasized its more coercive and dominating aspects and have approached it as a problem to be contained and avoided. An alternative orientation to power is presented here which focuses on positive forms of mutually constructive power. This approach to power offers a vision of what could be, as well as a strategy for limiting the use of coercive power by proactively approaching and building positive power at all levels of social interaction. The implications of destructive and constructive power for families, schools, work organizations and ethnic conflict are discussed.
Positive Power: Mapping the Dimensions of Constructive Power Relations

“Our task is not to learn where to place power; it is how to develop power… Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but co-active control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe; co-active power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul” (p. xii).

- Mary Parker-Follett (1924)

Power evokes strong emotions in people, conjuring up images of domination and submission, of struggles for liberation against exploitation. In daily life, we see countless examples of coercive power being used to oppress; establishing and maintaining injustices, and often leading to the demise of those in low power or to the escalation of conflict, violence and war. These instances are seen at every level of social interaction; from interpersonal relations to international affairs. Lord Action’s observation that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely remains widely cited and believed. The powerful are typically envisioned as self-serving and tyrannical, and the powerless, vulnerable and ingratiating. This is the context that has shaped the traditional approach to the study of power.

Since early on in the development of the social sciences, the general concept of power has been confused with the narrower idea of force (Boulding, 1990). Force is closely linked with dominance, which is only one aspect of power. Power, inherently, is neither constructive nor destructive (Tjosvold, 1984); it can be either or both. Dominance and the abuse of power have been of great concern to psychologists, who have tended to approach the problem with a prevention orientation (see Higgins, 1997). This approach has sought to investigate and comprehend the destructive side of social power in an attempt to control it and avoid it. However, as the quote by Mary Parker Follett suggests,
it is the positive side of power that may hold the potential for mutual enrichment and, ultimately, for a reduction in the use and abuse of coercive power in our world. Positive power can promote individual development and well being as well as foster dynamic and supportive teams. This alternative orientation to the study of power can contribute to a vision and an understanding of constructive forms of social power that we can begin to move towards in the years ahead.

We address five questions regarding social power in this article: (a) How can we approach power in a manner that is both comprehensive and useful for theory and research? (b) What is the prevailing, and negative, orientation to power in psychological theory and research and what are its underlying assumptions and values? (c) What is an alternative, positive orientation to power and what forms can it take in social relations? (d) What are the factors and conditions that promote positive power? (e) What are the psychological and social implications of positive power for theory, research, and for social interaction?

A Comprehensive Approach to Power

There is considerable confusion and disagreement on how to define power in the social science literature. Deutsch (1973) offers a comprehensive perspective on power that conceptualizes it as a relational concept that resides in the relationship of the person to his or her environment. Power, therefore, is determined not only by the characteristics of the person or persons involved in any given situation, nor solely by the characteristics of the situation, but by the interaction of these two sets of factors. The power of any group of striking workers, for example, can be seen as the result of their ability to
organize and mobilize their colleagues in a particular setting where demand for their services are high and alternative sources of labor are scarce.

Deutsch also makes an important distinction between three specific meanings of power. These are: environmental power, the degree to which an individual can favorably influence his or her overall environment; relationship power, the degree to which a person can favorably influence another person, and; personal power, the degree to which a person is able to satisfy his or her own desires. These three meanings for power may be positively correlated (for example, high relationship power equals high personal power), but this is not necessarily so. The important point is that these are three distinct, but interrelated realms for power and that a shift in one type of power (relationship) may result in either a gain or a loss of another type of power (personal or environmental) depending on the people and circumstances. For example, the coercive control of an adolescent daughter by the girl’s father may result in a loss of the father’s environmental power (increased tension and disharmony at home) and personal power (due to feelings of guilt, regret, and inefficacy).

Power has been defined in its broadest sense as “the ability to make things happen” (Follett, 1925) or “the potential for change” (Boulding, 1990). Given our relational and multi-level context for understanding power, we define power as the capacity to affect the outcomes of oneself, of another, and of one’s environment. Of course, one’s outcomes or goals can be cooperative, competitive, or independent of others. This “capacity” could be operationalized in a variety of ways, such as having control of valued resources, skill in converting resources to affect outcomes, and good judgment in employing power so that it is appropriate in type and magnitude to the situation.
In summary, *power* can be generally conceptualized as a mutual interaction between the characteristics of a person and the characteristics of a situation, where the person has the capacity to affect outcomes in their personal, relational and/or environmental domains.

The Destructive Side of Power

The Power of A over B. Morgan (1986) believed that organizational theorists mainly derive their thinking on power relations from the definition of power offered by American political scientist Robert Dahl. Dahl (1968) proposed that power involves “an ability to get another person to do something that he or she would not otherwise have done” (p. 158). This ability is often linked with the capacity to overcome the resistance of the other. This definition has been influential with many eminent social theorists, past (Weber, 1947; Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950; Dahl, 1957; Cartwright, 1959, French & Raven, 1959; Emerson, 1962) and present (Kipnis, 1976; Pfeffer, 1981; Raven, Schwarzwald and Koslowsky, 1998; Frieze, 1999; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 1989; Mossholder, Bennett, Kemery, & Wesolowski, 1998; Rahim, 1989; Schriesheim, Hinkin, & Podsakoff 1991). Power, then, is seen from this perspective as a special kind of successful influence over another. Just reminding another to do what he or she had planned to do is therefore not power, for the powerful must overcome the other’s unwillingness to perform the desired behavior.

The competitive definition of power carry’s with it a set of assumptions and values about the nature of power, the nature of people, and the nature of power relations. Unpacking this orientation reveals the following assumptions:
• **Power is a fixed-pie resource.** There is a limited amount of power that exists in any relational system; therefore the more power A has the less power available for B.

• **People hoard power.** People will always use what power they have to increase their power. This is best articulated by the widely accepted proposition on power offered by Michels (1911) who stated, “(E)very human power seeks to enlarge its prerogatives. He who has acquired power will almost always endeavor to consolidate it and to extend it…” (p. 207). This is often associated with the self-serving nature of the powerful, or what McClelland (1975) referred to as a “personalized power orientation”, exemplified by a tendency to dominate others in an attempt to satisfy one’s own selfish or hedonistic desires.

• **Power relations are unidirectional.** Power moves from A to B. This negates the notion of mutual influence. This also leads to a dichotomous division between those who are powerful and those who are powerless (Miller, 1982).

• **Power relations are intrinsically competitive.** Due to its scarcity as a resource, power relations are zero-sum. This assumes an incompatibility between the person with power and the person subject to it. Low power persons comply against their self-interest. Indeed, Weber (1947) explicitly restricted power to competition. The result is that in theorizing on power, it is hard to distinguish the dynamics resulting from competition and those from power.

• **Power equals coercion.** Lasswell and Kaplan (1950) described the exercise of power as “simply the exercise of a high degree of coerciveness” (pg. 98).
• **Power is control.** Essentially, the competitive view of power is a basic value orientation labeled by Kluckholn & Strodtbeck (1961) as one of *mastery-over-nature*. This is the general view that “it is part of a man’s duty to overcome obstacles…forces of all kinds are to be overcome and put to the use of humans” (pg. 13). This duty dictates our need to master and control other people and our environment.

Studying competitive power and dominance has been immensely important. The salience of destructive forms of power on the world stage, in communities, businesses, families, and so on has certainly demanded such investigation. It has led to important advances in the measurement of individual differences regarding power such as authoritarianism (Adorno, 1950), Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), and social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sadanious, 1999), as well as a useful typology of the resources of power often used when asserting power over others (French & Raven, 1959). In fact, the predominance of this approach has paralleled other areas of psychology that have mainly focused on the pathologies and deficits of the human condition (See Seligman, 1998; 1999).

Furthermore, under certain conditions competitive or dominating power can be a necessary or practical tool. For example, when in conflict with unjust and unresponsive others, or in situations where subordinates are hostile or unmotivated to comply with reasonable demands. It would be unrealistic to expect prison guards or riot police to use anything but dominating strategies under crisis conditions in their work. Nevertheless, useful as it may be, this perspective is limited and ultimately de-emphasizes other important aspects of power.

The Constructive Side of Power: An Alternative View
Given the prevailing negative view and preventative approach to destructive power, what might a constructive alternative look like?

The Power of A with B. Mary Parker Follett, writing in the 1920s, offered a different perspective on power. Follett argued that even though power was usually conceived of as “power-over” others (the power of A over B), that it would also be possible to develop the conception of “power-with” others. She envisioned this type of power as jointly developed, co-active and non-coercive (see Follett, 1973). In fact, Follett suggested that one of the most effective ways to limit the use of coercive power strategies was to develop the idea, the capacity, and the conditions that foster co-active power. The processes of collaborative negotiation and power sharing that developed between the former government of F.W. de Klerk and the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela nicely illustrates the practical success and transformative possibility of this form of mutual power. This potential exists at all levels, such as within successful business mergers, community coalitions, well-functioning family systems, and mutually satisfying partnerships.

The values and assumptions implied in co-active power are as follows:

- **Power is expandable.** It is possible to grow power and enhance everyone’s situation through both mutually cooperative and independent efforts. As Follett (1924) asserted, “Genuine power can only be grown” (p. xii).

- **People will share power.** Under certain conditions people will share their power and resources with others. They may share it because they see it as instrumental to meeting their own needs in an interdependent relationship, out of genuine concern for those in low power, or because they see it as morally right to do so. McClelland
(1975) proposed that individuals with a high need for power who also exhibited a high activity inhibition (a high level of self-control and general orientation to others) tend to exhibit a “socialized power orientation” where the individuals use their power for the good of a cause, an organization, or an institution.

- **Power relations are bi-directional.** Mutual influence, whether up and down in an hierarchical structure or side by side as with colleagues, is a key determinant of this orientation. Follett proposed that “Every demand for power should be analysed to determine if the object is ‘independent’ power or joint power” (1925, p. 103). This captures the dynamic interplay between high and low-power parties, and between self, other, and the environment.

- **Power relations are potentially cooperative.** The possibility exists in some power relations for common goals to exist and for mutually satisfying outcomes to be achieved including the enhancement of the abilities of both parties to achieve their future desired outcomes. For example, when conflicts occur in situations that have cooperative task, reward or outcome interdependence structures, or between disputants that share a cooperative orientation, there will be more cooperative power. In other words, in these situations conflicts will likely be framed as a mutual problem to be solved by both parties, which leads to an increased tendency to minimize power differences between the disputants and to mutually enhance each other’s power in order to more effectively work together to achieve their shared goals (Deutsch, 1973).

- **Power in one’s inducibility.** This is the belief that people’s capacity to affect outcomes can be positively affected by their openness to the influence of others.

Zajonc (1960) identified two basic ways people deal with information: transmitting
and receiving. Often, when trying to coerce or persuade others, people move into a unilateral “closed mode” of communication that activates more rigid cognitive structures. This impairs learning and the integration of new information. When in a receiving mode, people remain open to learning. Thus, the process of dialogue (Bohm, 1980) has been contrasted with the process of persuasion and problem-solving, where when in dialogue with others people remain open during the exchange to the discovery of information and solutions of which they were previously unaware (see Kolb & Coolidge, 1991). Feminist researchers label this “power from emerging interaction” (Surrey, 1987).

- **Power in harmony.** Underlying the cooperative view of power is a basic value orientation labeled by Kluckholn & Strodtbeck (1961) as one of *harmony-with-nature*. This is the belief that there is no real separation between people and between people and nature. They write, “One is simply an extension of the other, and a conception of wholeness derives from their unity” (p. 13). Power, therefore, is in finding and maintaining the balance that exists within one’s relationships and between oneself and one’s surroundings. Difficulties or a loss of power occur when this balance is interrupted, or when one loses touch with the needs and changes of others and of one’s environment.

To summarize, we define positive power as those forms of power that bring about constructive outcomes for self, other and the environment. This is power “with” and “to”, but not “against”. It is a type of power that is flexible and responsive to others and to the environment; that is mutual and open to influence; and that is applied to the good of all involved. Positive power means that people search out each other’s abilities and
appreciate other’s contributions, negotiate and influence each other to exchange resources that will help them both be more productive, and encourage each other to develop and enhance their valued abilities. We identify three basic types of positive power:

- **Benign autocratic.** Typically occurring in high/low power relations where those in low power experience the autocratic use of power by those in high-power as largely benevolent and serving the greater good.
- **Cooperative and participatory.** Occurring in high/low or equal power relations where both parties share cooperative goals and have essentially equal influence in the process and access to the outcomes.
- **Independent.** The development of one’s own capacity to positively effect one’s outcomes in a manner that does not negatively impact others.

The constructive perspective on power provides us with a rich and important alternative to destructive forms of power. However, the main thesis of this article is that forms of positive power have been insufficiently conceptualized and explored in empirical and practical settings. For example, cooperative power is evidenced in the work of few scholars today, most notably Deutsch (1973), McClelland (1975), Tjosvold (1981, 1987), Kantor (1977), Coleman (1997), and Tjosvold, Coleman, & Sun (1999). We argue that positive power should be nurtured and more extensively studied for it can have a dramatic impact on individual development, group effectiveness and environmental harmony.

**Factors Conducive to the Use of Positive Power**

A wide variety of factors may influence the constructive and destructive use of power, including psychological, social, political, economic, historical, and cultural variables. We
will not attempt to summarize them all here, but will outline a few critical factors from psychological research on power.

People’s psychological orientation to power and authority relations has been shown to be central to the use of positive power (see McClelland, 1975; Coleman, 1977; Coleman, in press). In his seminal work on power and motivation, McClelland (1975) found that people everywhere experience and express power by either: 1) obtaining support from others, often through a dependence relationship; 2) establishing one’s autonomy and independence from others; 3) assertively acting upon, influencing and dominating others; and 4) becoming part of an organization or a group. He proposed that as people mature, they progress through each of these stages of development and orientations to power, ideally moving toward the mutually constructive, “socialized” stage, which he labeled **togetherness**. Coleman (1997) has shown that people with a cooperative cognitive orientation to power are more willing to share resources and involve others in decision-making than those with a competitive orientation. Coleman (in press) has also argued that people’s dominant power orientation has implications for their cognitive, motivational, and moral approach to power relations, but that the social environment plays a critical role in shaping these. In a recent experiment, powerholders who were led to believe that power was expandable in a given context (compared to a limited resource) developed cooperative relationships and provided support and resources to their subordinates, especially when employees lacked the ability rather than the motivation to perform well (Tjosvold, Coleman, & Sun, 1999).

Hierarchy and goal interdependence are two dimensions of social situations which play a critical role in shaping and activating different psychological orientations to power.
(see Deutsch, 1985). Barnard (1946) argued that status and authority distinctions are ultimately necessary for the effective functioning and survival of any group above a certain size. As a result, most groups form some type of formal or informal hierarchical structure in order to function efficiently. Often, the greater advantages associated with higher positions leads to competition for these scarce positions, and an attempt by those in authority to maintain their status (Deutsch, 1973).

However, an hierarchical structure does not necessarily lead to competitive or destructive power relations within a group. In a series of studies on power and goal interdependence, (Tjosvold, 1981; Tjosvold, Johnson & Johnson, 1984; Tjosvold, 1985a,b) researchers found that difference in goal interdependence (task, reward and outcome goals) affected the likelihood of the constructive use of power between high- and low-power persons. Cooperative goals, when compared to competitive and independent goals, were found to induce “higher expectations of assistance, more assistance, greater support, more persuasion and less coercion and more trusting and friendly attitudes” between superiors and subordinates (Tjosvold, 1997, p. 297). Follett (1925) argued that cooperative interdependence, which she labeled “integration” and “functional unity”, was the condition most likely to reduce the use of “power over”.

The abundant research on cooperative and competitive goal interdependence has consistently demonstrated the contrasting effects of these different goal structures on people’s attitudes and behaviors in social relations. Among other things, competition fosters “attempts to enhance the power differences between oneself and the other”, in contrast with cooperation which fosters “an orientation toward enhancing mutual power rather than power differences” (Deutsch, 1982). In cooperative situations, people want
others to perform effectively and to use their joint resources to promote common objectives.

Elsewhere, Tjosvold (1991) provided a framework for establishing strong cooperative links and constructive power by developing: (a) a common direction and vision, (b) mutual tasks, (c) assessment of joint productivity, (d) shared rewards contingent upon success, (e) complementary responsibilities and roles that require collaboration, and (f) team identity and supportive culture (p. 297). We add to these the processes of (g) mutual recognition and appreciation of each other’s strengths, (h) reciprocal exchange of resources, (i) openness to development and learning, and ideally (j) a shared value base that emphasizes human dignity, human equality, nonviolence, reciprocity, respect of diverse others, and a common good (Rawls, 1996).

Finally, some scholars working with positive forms of power have identified some of the situational constraints for the use of this type of power (see Vroom & Jago, 1988; Kanter, 1979). These include time constraints (given the time-consuming nature of participatory processes), the entrenched institutionalization of coercive power, and certain pathologies associated with extreme forms of cooperation such as conflict avoidance, nepotism, and groupthink (Janis, 1972).

Implications for Destructive and Constructive Power

In general, a competitive or coercive approach to power is likely to have harmful consequences. Deutsch (1973) suggested that a reliance on dominating strategies of influence by powerholders produces alienation and resistance in those subjected to the power. This, in turn, limits the powerholder’s ability to use other types of power that are based on trust (such as normative, expert, referent, and reward power), and increases the
need for continuous scrutiny and control of subordinates. An employer who demands obedience from his workers in a climate of mutual distrust will foster more distrust and must be prepared to keep them under frequent surveillance. If the goal of the powerholder is to achieve compliance and commitment from her or his subordinates, then reliance on a “power over” strategy will prove to be costly as well as largely ineffective. Furthermore, it is evident that when powerholders have a chronic competitive perspective on relational power, it reduces the likelihood that they will be able to see power-sharing with members of low power groups as an opportunity to enhance their own personal or environmental power.

In contrast, the value and benefits of constructive approaches to power have been documented for individuals (Natiello, 1990; Bagarozzi, 1990), groups (Gutierrez, 1990; Home, 1991), communities (Flynn, Ray & Rider, 1994; Labonte, 1994), and organizations (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Likert, 1967; Walls, 1990; Argyris, 1970; McGregor, 1960; Kanter, 1983; 1982; Hollander & Offermann, 1990; Yukl, 1994; Tjosvold, 1981; 1985a, 1985b). Below, we outline some of the implications for families, schools, work organizations, and for inter-ethnic conflict.

**Families.** Psychologists with orientations from psychodynamic to cognitive developmental have argued that children periodically contest the power and authority of their parents as they mature. Parents committed to unilateral control make the resolution of these power struggles problematic, leaving children either passive-aggressive or highly rebellious and counter-dependent (Breger, 1972). Parents who use these struggles to promote the power of their children as well as themselves make resolutions more likely to help their children become both assertive and responsive and eventually develop an
integrated self-concept. Ross (1993) in an analysis of 90 preindustrial societies, found that exceptionally intense violence is significantly more likely in cultures where children are typically reared in cold, autocratic families, particularly when children are routinely physically or emotionally abused.

**Education.** Similarly in education, providing children with empowering opportunities and skills to influence their school life contributes to their psychological development and achievement (de Charms, 1976). They feel like the origins of their behavior, not pawns. Students randomly assigned to participate in classroom decisions, compared to those who were informed of them, were observed to spend more time on tasks and demonstrated greater learning (Richter & Tjosvold, 1980)

**Work organizations.** Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1989) have documented that power can have a highly positive face as well as a negative one in work organizations. Research in several high technology firms in Silicon Valley concluded that leader’s use of centralized power to control, and the resulting political activity that occurs, consumed time, distorted perceptions, diverted attention, resulted in inferior solutions, and frustrated resource sharing among groups. The competitive power dynamics also appeared to have greatly impacted the bottom line; one of the firms had declining sales, another was a moderate performer with low growth and modest profits, and the two others later went into bankruptcy.

In companies with decentralized power, executives adopted a team-oriented, consensus style of managing targeted for company benefit. Top management meetings focused on important issues, and people changed their minds once confronted with useful
ideas and data. Issues were not glossed over; they had many disagreements and some heated conflicts. These executives were energetic, committed, and successful. One company had sales growing 25% to 100% per quarter, another tripled its sales in the year of the study, and one had a 50% sales growth. The fourth company was still in a start-up mode, but the future looked promising.

**Ethnic conflict.** Ethnic conflict has quickly emerged as a central challenge in our globalized world. Ethnic differences are not new, nor is the determination to use coercion and violence to handle these differences. Ethnic stereotypes have been shown to induce competitive expectations and actions (Johnson & Johnson, 1972). Competitive expectations in turn induce a feeling that others are not open to influence and that only strong, coercive attempts are effective, which in turn induces counter attack and escalation (Deutsch, 1973). Unfortunately, even heavy mutual costs are insufficient to stimulate the insight and ability to move toward mutual, positive power. However, Salacuse (in press) has recently outline a series of tactics for use in intra- and international conflicts which include options for constructive autonomous and community building approaches.

**In Conclusion: A Beginning**

The American Revolutionaries portrayed power as alive and bent on destruction; social science theorizing on power has built upon this corrupting theme. But it is we who make power destructive or constructive, not power itself. Our research indicates that we have a choice about the course and consequences of power. Containing and avoiding coercive power is not a basis for positive psychology. The challenge for psychological
researchers is to clarify the choices between constructive and destructive power, build an empirical basis upon which people can make informed decisions, and suggest methods they can use to implement their choices. There is much work to be done.

References


