Social Power and Influence Tactics: A Theoretical Introduction

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This issue aims to demonstrate the practical value of studying a range of social problems in interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup situations from a perspective of power and influence processes. In doing so, it extends the currently rapidly developing theoretical and experimental work on power and influence phenomena in a practical direction. This introductory article gives a brief historical overview of the area of social power and influence tactics by describing the core theoretical ideas.

After a period of relatively modest activity, research on social power and influence is now rapidly increasing in force, size, and impact. The aim of the present issue is twofold. Firstly, it aims to show how this growing field of research can contribute to our understanding of various social problems. Secondly, it endeavors to elucidate the possibilities for remedial actions to counter these problems as they are suggested by the research.

The contributions in the present issue find their application in interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup situations that are characterized by more or less extensive contacts and communications between the individuals within those situations. This choice is indicative of the intention to investigate the present topic in some depth rather than addressing a wide range of issues more superficially. Because of this concerted effort, an intrapersonal perspective dealing with topics like self-efficacy and locus of control is not considered, nor is a societal-level perspective (e.g., Lukes, 1974). Instead, this issue concentrates on interpersonal contact and communication. Such contacts and communications have many functions (e.g.,

This introduction was written before the sudden death of Dr. Bruins and represents his initial thoughts on theories of social power and influence. Only minor revisions have been made.
providing a sense of belongingness and safety, exchanging information, and asserting one’s identity), but arguably one of the most important ones is to influence others and be influenced by others. In different types of situations, a breakdown or deterioration of this influence process can have severe negative consequences. For instance, in interpersonal situations, a faltering influence process can lead to the breakup of close personal relationships and to interpersonal aggression. At the intragroup level, it can lead to effects such as family violence and organizational burnout, and at the intergroup level it can result in discrimination and hostilities like gang wars and the Rodney King beating.

The main focus of this issue is on how processes of social power and influence can form the basis for problems encountered by individual members of society, either as individuals or as members of various groups. However, the range of social problems for which the articles in this issue are relevant may ultimately go well beyond the interpersonal and intergroup level, because many social problems start at relatively low levels (such as, for instance, an individual worker’s feeling powerless against an authority). When such individual-level problems become sufficiently widespread, they often result in a collective endeavor to change the situation (e.g., through strike actions). Thus, in combination, individual-level problems as directly addressed in this issue not only are interesting in their own right, but can also contribute to the occurrence of larger scale disruptions like the Los Angeles riots, student uprisings, and other forms of protest and civil unrest.

In the following, a brief historical overview of thinking and research on social power and influence tactics will be presented together with a description of conceptual and definitional issues relating to power and influence.

The Foundations

Issues of power and influence have occupied scientific minds for centuries (e.g., Hobbes, 1651/1968; Lukes, 1974; Machiavelli, 1532/1984; Nietzsche, 1883-1888/1968; Russell, 1938; Weber, 1948; for an excellent description of the early work, see Ng, 1980). Many of the theoretical insights produced by this early work still serve as the groundwork for the more empirically oriented approach taken in modern social psychology. The social psychological study of power and influence as addressed in this issue has captivated researchers from the very birth of the discipline, and finds its origin in the groundbreaking theorizing of Kurt Lewin. Lewin (1941) considered power the possibility of inducing force on someone else, or, more formally, as the maximum force person A can induce on person B divided by the maximum resistance that B can offer.

Following Lewin’s initial conceptualization, French and Raven (1959), in one of the key papers in the literature on social power, defined influence as a force one person (the agent) exerts on someone else (the target) to induce a change in the target, including changes in behaviors, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, and values.
Social power was subsequently defined as the potential ability of an agent to influence a target. Thus, influence is “kinetic power, just as power is potential influence” (French & Raven, p. 152). However, the 1959 paper is more famous for the classification it offers of five different bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power. A sixth basis (informational power) was added later (Raven, 1965).

Reward and coercive power depend on the agent’s ability to bestow on the target positive and negative outcomes, respectively. Using either of these bases will induce only a superficial change in the target; that is, none of the target’s privately held beliefs, attitudes, or values are changed. Instead, only public compliance is obtained, the continuation of which depends on successful surveillance of the target by the agent. Legitimate power is based on the target’s belief that the agent has a legitimate right to exert influence, and that the target has an obligation to accept this influence. It leads to private acceptance that comes from within the target and as such it does not require surveillance by the agent in order to be successful. Referent power depends on the target’s identifying with the agent. It again leads to private acceptance by the target through enabling the target to maintain a satisfactory relationship with the agent and see himself/herself as similar to the target on certain relevant dimensions. Expert power of the agent depends on the target’s attributing superior knowledge or experience to the agent. When such faith in the agent is present, expert power will again result in private acceptance on the part of the target. Informational power, finally, leads to internalized and lasting changes in the target’s beliefs, attitudes or values. Contrary to the bases of power previously discussed, informational power is independent both of the person of the agent and of the agent’s relationship with the target, and is instead based on the perceived relevance and validity of the information. A related discussion of social influence processes in terms of compliance, identification, and internalization is offered by Kelman (1956, 1961; see also Raven, 1974).

The Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence

Recently, Raven (1992) extended and reworked the original bases of power into a Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. Apart from a much more detailed description of the bases of power, the model’s main advance from the original classification of power bases is that it offers a dynamic view of power and influence processes. In essence, the model describes the agent as a rational decision maker who weighs various costs and benefits of the power bases available to him/her before invoking one of them to influence the target. The model also describes possible consequences of an influence attempt, such as changes in the agent’s motivation to influence the target, in his or her assessment of available power bases, and in feelings toward and perceptions of both self and the target. Also, on the part of the target, various effects other than private acceptance or
public compliance can occur as a result of an influence attempt, like changes in the target’s perceptions of self and of the agent and changes in the power relationship.

**The Power Act Model**

A simultaneous development of ideas on power and influence started with the publication of *The Powerholders* (Kipnis, 1976). In this book, Kipnis describes a Power Act Model that approaches the study of influence processes from the point of view of the agent of influence. The model states that one’s choice of a “means of influence” depends mainly on the resources one has available (i.e., on the power bases one possesses), on one’s inhibition to invoke a power basis (as determined by one’s estimate of the costs of using a power basis, one’s subjective values and attitudes, individual differences, and social norms), and on the resistance that one expects on the part of the target toward the influence attempt. A rational process is assumed here: First the agent analyzes the reasons behind the resistance, and subsequently this diagnosis guides the agent’s choice of a means of influence. With increasing (expected) resistance, the agent can either abandon the influence attempt, modify his/her original needs, or decide to invoke a stronger means of influence.

As compared to the Power/Interaction Model, the Power Act Model is more specific and detailed on the consequences side of the model. The model proposes that the stronger the means of influence used by the agent, the more the agent will tend toward making an internal attribution for the target’s compliance, in turn leading to a more negative evaluation of the target and a tendency to increase the social distance toward the target. Also, under the name of “metamorphic effects,” strong influence tactics are expected to lead to an enhanced self-evaluation on the part of the agent. Direct support for such metamorphic effects are reported in this issue by Rind and Kipnis.

A subsequent development (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980) sought to investigate the “means of influence” referred to by Kipnis (1976), by identifying the specific behaviors people have at their disposal for influencing others (from then on referred to as influence tactics). Kipnis et al. found eight categories of tactics: assertiveness, ingratiation, rationality, sanctions, exchange, upward appeal, blocking, and coalitions. The scales used to measure the tactics suitable for use toward superiors were later refined by Schriesheim and Hinkin (1990). A very similar classification has in the meantime been developed by Yukl and his colleagues (Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).

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1 Originally, this model was not given a specific name. The current name was given to the model for reasons of clarity of presentation only.
The Power Use Model

In its striving for optimum parsimony, the Power Use Model (Bruins, 1996a) predicts someone’s choice of influence tactic only in terms of its softness versus hardness. This dimension is defined in terms of how much freedom a tactic leaves the target to decide either to yield or to resist the influence attempt: Hard tactics (e.g., sanctions) leave the target less freedom than soft tactics (e.g., reasoning). The dimension soft versus hard has been alluded to by several authors (e.g., Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Kipnis, 1976; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1985), and recent evidence has supported the view propounded in these papers by showing that the soft-hard dimension indeed is the main dimension on which various influence tactics can be discriminated from one another (Bruins, 1996b).

The Power Use Model proposes that (provided the tactics are available to the agent), agents who see the target as an outgroup member will use harder tactics than agents who see the target as a fellow ingroup member. Whether a target is seen as an in- or an outgroup member is, in the model, not simply a matter of predetermined group boundaries as they can be readily observed in our ordinary conceptualization of reality (e.g., mother, father and children are all members of the group family), but instead, group boundaries are defined at a psychological level (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). As such, the perception of group boundaries will depend on contextual characteristics of the situation. An example would be that when a child is misbehaving, parents will be more inclined to see themselves as educators of their children (thereby each perceiving the other parent as an ingroup member and the child as an outgroup member), but when father and son are planning a hike in the country, the father is more inclined to see the fellow parent as a (gender-based) outgroup member and the child as an ingroup member. Despite the fact that group membership is the only determinant of influence tactic choices, this conceptualization of perceived group boundaries makes the Power Use Model extremely flexible.

In the model at present, five different variables are suggested that may each in themselves, or in combination with other variables, mediate the relation between group membership of the target person vis-à-vis the agent and the kind of influence tactic the agent will choose to influence that target: uncertainty reduction, expected opposition, desire to be liked, assertion of group membership, and cognitive consistency. In fact, all variables could play a role, each under different circumstances or in different situations.

On the consequences side, the Power Use Model suggests that the target’s response (yielding vs. resistance), together with the softness versus hardness of the used tactic, affects the perception of the relationship between agent and target in terms of group membership. Changes in this perception in turn affect changes in one or more of the proposed mediating variables and through them, the likelihood of using soft versus hard tactics in a future influence attempt.
Conclusions

Over the past decades, research on social power and influence tactics as outlined above has developed along two parallel lines. The first line, culminating in the Power/Interaction Model, can be characterized as a development starting with theoretical ideas on social power, and then going on to the search for empirical evidence for those ideas. The second line of research, culminating in classifications of influence tactics, starts from empirical findings on how people attempt to influence others and subsequently tries to explain these findings in theoretical terms. The main advantage of the first approach (from theory to evidence) is scientific rigor, but on the downside the question remains whether the theory is complete (i.e., whether it covers all influence tactics people use). Conversely, the main advantage of the second approach (from evidence to theory) is that one can be fairly sure of the completeness of the obtained empirical description, but in terms of finding underlying mechanisms that drive the influence process (i.e., causal relations), the approach is very weak. Obviously, the ideal would be to combine the advantages of the two separate approaches. Both the Dyadic Social Influence Model and the Power Use Model can be regarded attempts to do this by bringing the two lines of work together.

Two avenues for future work are now open. Similar to finding out whether an object is a hammer by considering the materials of which it is made and its shape, size, and weight, one avenue is to test the proposed models empirically in (field-) experimental studies. However, one can also learn more about hammer-like properties of an object by investigating whether it allows a user to comfortably drive a nail into a plank. The equivalent of this avenue would be to investigate the extent to which the models of power and influence processes are able to suggest solutions to real-life problems, and to which extent the suggested solutions work. Although arguably this approach is somewhat less scientifically rigorous, it obviously has the strong advantage of offering the possibility of relieving some serious social problems. Therefore, this issue wants to embark upon a research effort along this latter avenue, hoping it will form a starting point for more applied work by indicating the fruitfulness of approaching the study of various social issues from a power and influence perspective.

In sum, in the past, progress in research on power and influence processes has been slow but steady. However, over the last few years a strongly increased interest in these matters has been witnessed, both in terms of the theoretical thinking as outlined above, and in terms of empirical research. This is therefore an appropriate time to address the extent to which the progress made in this area can be applied to a variety of social problems. Besides rigorous empirical testing, suggesting possible solutions to social problems will be the major test for the advances made toward better understanding influence and power processes.
References


JAN BRUINS received his Ph.D. from the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, in 1992. His dissertation was on power processes in small groups. He was a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Essex, in Colchester, U.K., at the time of his death. His research concentrated on the consequences of power and status differences between group members, on determinants and consequences of power.
use in interpersonal and intergroup situations, and on procedural justice aspects of power and influence processes.