

1.c.5. The Psychological 'Bases' of Power and Influence

The Importance of Target Beliefs

What factors determine the likely success of an influencing attempt? Yukl's theories concentrated on the choice of 'influencing tactics'. The previous text mentioned the importance of perceived task characteristics. An earlier theory, developed initially by French and Raven (1959), focussed instead on key beliefs held by the target. They argued that these beliefs create the 'bases of power', where 'power' is defined as the potential for a successful influencing attempt.

There have been many different versions of these psychological 'bases of power'. I have adapted the following definitions slightly from those used by Rahim (1988) to examine downward influence in an organizational hierarchy. These definitions are specific to downward influencing attempts in an organizational hierarchy where a 'superior' is the agent and a 'subordinate' is the target.

1. **Coercive power** is based on the belief of a subordinate that they may be punished if they fail to conform to the superior's influencing attempt.
2. **Reward power** is based on the belief of a subordinate that they may be rewarded for conforming to the superior's influencing attempt.
3. **Legitimate power (Authority)** is based on the belief of a subordinate that a superior has the right to prescribe and control their behavior.
4. **Expert power** is based on the belief of a subordinate that a superior has job experience and special knowledge or expertise in a given area.
5. **Referent power** is based on subordinates' interpersonal attraction to and identification with a superior connected to admiration or personal liking of the superior.

Relationship Between Psychological Bases of Power and Outcomes

Most studies on the effects of the psychological power bases have looked at the correlations between each type of belief and one or more of the following outcomes: general compliance with requests, subjective commitment to work, subjective job performance, job satisfaction and satisfaction with supervision.

The variety of definitions and measuring instruments make it difficult to summarize the findings. But as a broad generalization, positive correlations with most of these outcomes

tend to be higher for Expert and Referent Power and lower for Coercive Power. This difference is clearest for 'satisfaction' variables, particularly 'satisfaction with supervision' (Carson et.al. 1993 Rahim 1998). Results for Reward Power and Legitimate Power are quite variable between studies. In a few studies, Reward Power is related to slightly higher overall performance, and Legitimate Power to higher levels of compliance (Yukl et.al. 1996).

Quality of Evidence - Weak to Moderate

In the years following the initial formulation of the 'bases of power' theory by French and Raven (1959) there were quite a few correlational studies looking at the relationship between these bases and various outcomes. The quality of many of these studies, however, was quite low. Podsakoff and Schriesheim (1985), criticized them for a wide variety of reasons including the use of invalid and narrow questions to measure the power base and the failure to recognize the problem of using the same 'self report' questionnaires to measure both the power base and outcomes like 'satisfaction with supervision'. They concluded that: "Although the French and Raven framework remains highly popular, the existing research does not support drawing confident conclusions about such things as relations between the five power bases and sub-ordinate outcome variables."

A meta-analysis of a small sample of these low quality studies that is often referenced in textbooks, actually found quite low correlations where we might expect to see stronger relationships. For example, the overall correlation between Referent Power and Performance in 5 studies was just $r=0.1$. (Carson, Carson and Roe 1993).

One of the main difficulties in interpreting these results of these and subsequent studies is that all these beliefs tend to be correlated. Coercive Power, Legitimate Power, and Reward Power tend to be moderately correlated with each other. Expert and Referent Power also tend to be moderately correlated. Interestingly, Legitimate Power also tends to be correlated with Expert and Reward Power (Yukl et.al. 1996, Rahim 2014). These correlations make it difficult to interpret the results. What is creating these correlations? One possibility is that one type of belief leads to another type of belief. For example, if workers believe that a manager has more 'Legitimate Power' they may also believe that this manager is more Expert. Carson et.al. (1995), and more recently, Rahim (2014), have attempted to model causal relationships between these beliefs. But their models are complex, speculative and differ substantially.

An alternative explanation for these correlations is that there are underlying organizational and personal factors that affect several types of beliefs at the same time. For example, when a manager has a more senior position in a hierarchical organization, workers may believe that the manager's instructions are legitimate and also that the manager has the ability to reward and punish them. When a supervisor has a lot of job experience in a highly technical field, workers may believe that they are more knowledgeable and may also tend to respect them and identify with them.

Where Does This Leave Us?

The usual interpretation seems intuitively plausible. When workers are aware of a threat then this tends to damage their view of the supervisor and they often 'resist' the influencing attempt. When they like and respect the manager and believe that the manager has relevant expertise then they are more likely to perform better and be happier with supervision. It is understandable that textbooks tend to overlook the low quality of evidence when this interpretation seems to make sense.

At the same time, however, it is important not to read too much into this research. Most textbooks tend to assume that 'Reward Power' and 'Legitimate Power' fall somewhere between Coercive Power and Expert/Referent Power. In other words these beliefs tend to lead to 'compliance' but not 'commitment'. The evidence does not support this oversimplification. An alternative interpretation is that the effects of Reward and Legitimate Power are variable and depend very substantially on the situation. It is also important to remember that it is not possible to draw strong conclusions about causal relationships on the basis of this correlational research. The next chapter looks at this issue.

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