

Emergence of power in society

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In this paper, I shall attempt first to illustrate the pre-existing theories about power; secondly, I shall critique the individual natures of the same by introducing the concept of feminist theories and, lastly, present a conjecture of power as an emergent property of society.

Intuitively, the concept of power seems clear to all of us. It is used to describe everything from superheroes to speeches; however, we need to understand better what the word entails in society and politics. Etymologically speaking, power is rooted in the Latin word *posse*, meaning 'be able': it refers to the ability to do things and produce changes within a social structure defined by social relationships and interactions (Menon, 2008, 149).

Dahl gave the most popular definition of power: to capture the intuitive idea behind power; one must define *power* as a binary relation between people. If a person can be compelled to do something they would otherwise not do by an external party, then that external person has power over the first person. (Dahl, 1957, 203) This definition concludes that power is an individual attribute. Second, it essentially requires domination of the will, i.e., the person over whom the power is exercised must act against their own choice. (Menon, 2008, 149)

To understand this, we take the pertinent example of a professor and a student. Ostensibly, the professor has power over the student, but how? The professor can compel students to complete an assignment they would otherwise not do. Here, power is a directed, binary relation between the professor and the student. While this satisfies the definition, more is needed for a complete description. To get a thorough understanding, we must look at the domain, the means, and the scope of the professor's power over the student. First, the source domain of the professor's power is the university, which entrusts the professor with the power and the means to act in the student's best interest. Second, we must look at the means of this power. If the student does not complete the assignment, the professor can grade the student poorly, counsel him or even fail him. All these actions fall within the scope of the professor's power. For example, the professor cannot dictate what the student does outside class.

However, this definition proves inadequate; both the individual and domination aspects of it have been challenged by many. Here, we focus on the individual element and leave the domination facet for future discussion. We use feminist theories of power to illustrate and understand the detriments of the individual nature of Dahl's definition. Feminist theorists conceptualize power as being located within the structures of patriarchy, an overarching system that ensures male dominance at every level. Here, a woman is not oppressed because of her nature or behavior but because of her membership in the category of human beings labeled as 'women' (Menon, 2008, 154). This theory contradicts Dahl's definition of power as a binary relation between two people, as it shows us the exercise of a systematic power that serves to subjugate an entire class of people. Clearly, power and the lack thereof are not just relations between two individuals.

For example, in India, there exists a 17% gap in literacy between men and women (Chandra, 2019). This gap is a consequence of years of female oppression and subjugation by a patriarchal society that has only started to show progress. What this entails is that a boy is much more likely to be educated in Indian society than a girl is, despite any individual differences they may have other than their gender. As a society, we force girls to participate in household work for no reason other than patriarchal norms. There is inequity in the power dynamic here; the weight of an unequal society overpowers an individual girl.

Emergence refers to the arising of novel properties in complex systems due to their being compilations of smaller systems. These phenomena are conceptualized at a macro level, in contrast to the micro-level parts from which they arise (Goldstein, 1999, 49). A typical example of this emergence is seen in living, conscious systems which arise from molecules and their reactions at nanoscales. Another example is the game of chess, itself a board and a few wooden pieces have little significance, but when attached to a set of rules and put together, a complex tactical game arises.

Now, we put together Dahl's theory of individual power with the idea of power as the property of a collective together. I (finally!) claim that social power is an emergent phenomenon of individual power. This emergent theory means that due to Dahl's definition of power at

individual levels, an ideology can arise among similar individuals: they can exercise their power on a larger scale should they decide to group themselves. This 'clique' is then further reinforced and enlarged as it comes across other individuals with similar tendencies, and soon enough, the converse starts to occur. Now, instead of the group drawing power from the individuals, the individual is granted power by his similarity with this social group, reinforcing the group and the individual's power. This theory of the emergence of social power can be used to explain patriarchal systems in society as a result of the grouping together of individual misogynies.

References

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