Psychology Underground of Power: Memo #1

Power exists, in form or another, in every human interaction we encounter on a daily basis. The power relationship that exists between people can be of dominance and subservience or a reciprocal relationship where powered is either shared equally or varies from situation to situation. In most cases, when there is a dichotomy of power between two individuals, behavioral differences can be observed. From my own experiences and noted observances, there is a marked difference in how people with power use their cellular phones over individuals who do not have as much power using a cell phone.

I'll begin with how people answer their phones. In this day and age, all cell phones have caller ID system, allowing receivers to easily know the number and person who is calling them before they answer. As a throwback to the days of just landline, many people still naturally answer the phone with the rhetorical "hello?" However, those with power, or those that want to exude more power, usually answer the phone first identifying the caller and asking the first question. By establishing that the receiver (who wants or has power) knows who is calling and is already asking something of the caller, dominance is established before the caller can even begin to explain why they called. Usually, this phenomenon would go unnoticed, because the receiver's question is not out of line with what the caller wants, but it's still establishing their superiority. For example, as president of a student organization on campus, I usually will answer my phone as "Hi (Caller) what's up?" or "Hey (caller) what do you need?" However, when my boss calls me, I always answer with the questioning "Hello?" even though I know who it is. But, I allow my boss the time to identify herself and then tell me at her convenience what she wants.

How an individual talks to someone on their cell phone is also telling of power relationships. Although social norms have been pretty well established as to when and where it's

appropriate to talk on you phone in public, there is question as to how you act to the person who you're talking to. Clearly, cell phones are used for convenience and multitasking, in the car, at the store, while you walk, etc. I notice that others who are in positions of power over me are much more likely to interrupt our phone conversation to multitask, answer questions to people around them, or put me on hold as they take another call or deal with another issue. It seems natural to me that if someone is in a position of power over the other person on the line, they can more easily say "hold on," "just a minute," "can I call you back?," etc. without penalty or as much appeared disrespect. On the other hand, someone on the phone who is in the non-dominate role would very rarely interrupt the phone conversation to order a coffee or demand that they call the more powerful individual back because something seemingly more important arose.

From my own experiences talking with other student leaders on campus, the closing of a cell phone conversation can also be a clue to the dominant individual in the exchange – or, at the very least – the person who is trying to establish more dominance. When closing a conversation, I've never liked it when people have stated "Listen, I'm going to have to let you go, but…" This shows their superiority in a conversation, that they're not only ending the conversation first, but they're establishing that talking with them was a privilege. In addition, it makes whoever makes that statement appear as though they are sacrificing for the other person on the line – they're the one who's taking on the burden of wanting to hang up. In a reciprocal conversation, a much more common phrase would be "I'm sorry, I have to go…" or another statement which actually takes on the form acknowledging they either want or need to end a conversation.

Finally, I've observed that the amount of time it takes for a person to call individuals back can be a telling sign of relational power on the phone. With Caller ID and voicemail, everyone now knows who called them, how many times they called, and at what time they

received the call. In that manner, those who have more power appear to be less likely to quickly return calls to people who have less power. Again, those with power would place a lower priority on calls from those not their equal or superior, and have no problem explaining that they were busy and got back to the caller as soon as they could. In example, people on my executive board or committee chairs for my student organization, they always are quick to respond to my messages. At times, I have a quick or needless question, and I do not leave a message at all, because it's not worth my time for them to call me back. But, sure enough, about 75% of the time, people will call me back without even listening to my message, eagerly wanting to know what I wanted, or will return my call even if I didn't leave them a message.

With the modernization and technological advances occurring in our society, the rules and standards of interaction are consistently changing. As it becomes quicker and easier to communicate between individuals, more and more subtle ways of establishing, developing, and challenging power in relationships are being created and observed. Through the salutation, body, closing, and even response time of cellular phone conversations, power is in existence and is being asserted. And, like any situation, the difference in behavior between one caller and the other show us the dynamics and interplay of power in these situations.