

## 1. The Fundamental Laws of Power



# Basics of Social Power

What exactly constitutes social power?

This lesson covers the basic building blocks of social power. It's more on the theoretical side, but I recommend you go through it.

## #1. Control Over Others & Over One's Life

At the crudest level **power is getting what you want** and, when others stand in the way, to get them to do what you want.

Different authors and different texts provide different levers of power, including:

- Rank
- Authority
- Coercion
- Seduction
- Resources
- Interpersonal skills / charm / charisma

I have always believed that these categories overlap, interact and build upon each other too much to make any grouping useful.

But let's have a quick overview of the two most important ones:

### 1.1 Coercive Power: The Ability to Enforce

Coercive power is based on the ability to *force* others to do what you want.

It's the equivalent of firing employees at work, physical aggression in a disagreement, or government's incarceration for law-breakers.

It's good to have coercive power, even when you don't want to use it. As a matter of fact, coercive power can even be used to avoid escalations -as they say: if you can bite, you often don't have to-.

On the other hand, to maximize your freedom and personal power it's important to understand and correctly assess the boundaries of coercive power around you.

Why is it important?

It's important because when you don't do it rationally, your unconscious part of the brain will process it for you.

And **your reptilian brain exaggerates the dangers of coercive power**. Which means to you: you often end up behaving *too* defensively and submissively.

This is an important topic, so more on it during the course.

## 1.2. Authority: The Legitimization of Power

Authority is the legitimization of power.

When people perceive you as having authority, they feel like it's right and fair for you to also have power over them.

**The more authority people think you have, the more you influence people.**

On the other hand, when you can decrease or question someone else's authority, you delegitimize their power and hobble their ability to persuade and influence.

In theory, authority goes to the person who is most knowledgeable, most experienced or who has the highest rank.

In practice, authority can be partially faked and sometimes goes to the person who *looks* and *acts* like they have authority.

## #2. Resource Control: The Power Of Keeping Others Dependent

You have most likely heard this proverb:

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime*

From a perspective of power dynamics, it can be generalized this way: **the more people need you, the more power you have.**

And, conversely: **the less you need people, the less power you give away.**

The resources can be of different nature, including:

1. Financial resources (salary, accommodation, etc.)
2. Emotional (approval, flattery, etc.,)
3. Social support (cool parties, friends, professional network, etc.)

This can be a good time for a first self-assessment:

- Are you living from paycheck to paycheck? If so, you are financially dependent on your employer
- Are you craving the approval of someone? If so, you are emotionally dependent
- Do you need people to go out or join an event? If so, you are socially dependent on your friends

The goal is not to be *totally* independent, which would make for a hermit life but, if appropriate, reduce your dependence.

### #3. Frames – The Power Of Setting The Rules

A frame is a set of beliefs, morals, and perspectives with which people interpret the world.

When two people with different ways of looking at the world meet, **the person who can impose his frame on others is the most powerful.**

Frames become especially obvious when it comes to disagreements. Here is an example:

*San Valentine is approaching, he believes gifts are a waste of time and money. She believes that it's romantic and exchanging gifts is proof of caring.*

*What the couple does depends on whose frame prevails.*

Frames are personal as much as social.

When a frame is accepted by most of society it's very difficult for individuals to buck the trend.

In our San Valentine example, society's frame is on her side.

That makes it difficult for him to "win" the frame without her feeling like he is imposing his will. That could easily become a negative display of dominance which sours the relationship.

Of course, frames are not always this obvious, and we will see more examples going forward.

## **Frames Are The SOP of Relationships**

Why do frames determine who has the most power in a relationship?

Well, first of all, because the one wins *is* more powerful -more dominant, more persuasive, or both-.

But what's in it for him in winning the frame?

The advantage is that the relationship unfolds within *his* rules.

Frames carry a code of morals: what's fair and not fair, what's good and what's bad.

And the code of morals sets the "rails" of the relationship: **imposing your frame is a bit like imposing your legal system.**

This is important because the opposite is also true: when you buy into someone's frame, you are playing by *their* rules and your behavior is being judged based on what *they* believe in.

That not only gives away power but also limits your personal freedom.

A good part of **learning social dynamics is learning to see frames and whose frame you are playing by.**

As a quick example, let's rewatch this scene from Mrs. Doubtfire:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKiAJWc2ouU>

Her frame is that the big party is stupid. His frame is that the party is fun.

Whose frame wins? Just look at his face to know the answer: frame battles often happen without a word being spoken.

## When Frames Are A Trap

There will be situations in life where you must powerfully reject a frame even when you're not sure what's coming next.

Leading questions are such examples.

With leading questions, people are framing the interaction before you even reply.

Other times people embed a frame in their accusations (framed accusations), and you must reject the frame and *not* answer to the accusation.

Here is an example of Trump rejecting a "framed accusation":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L0tpJkiVXo>

**Interviewer:** *that is sexual assault, you bragged that you sexually assaulted women, do you understand that?*

Notice that the accusation frames Trump's words as sexual assault. Accepting this frame would have been political suicide. So Trump refuses the frame:

**Trump:** *no, I didn't say at all. I don't think you understood what was said (...)* That was locker-room talk

He refuses the frame of “sexual assault” and reframes it to “locker room talk”.

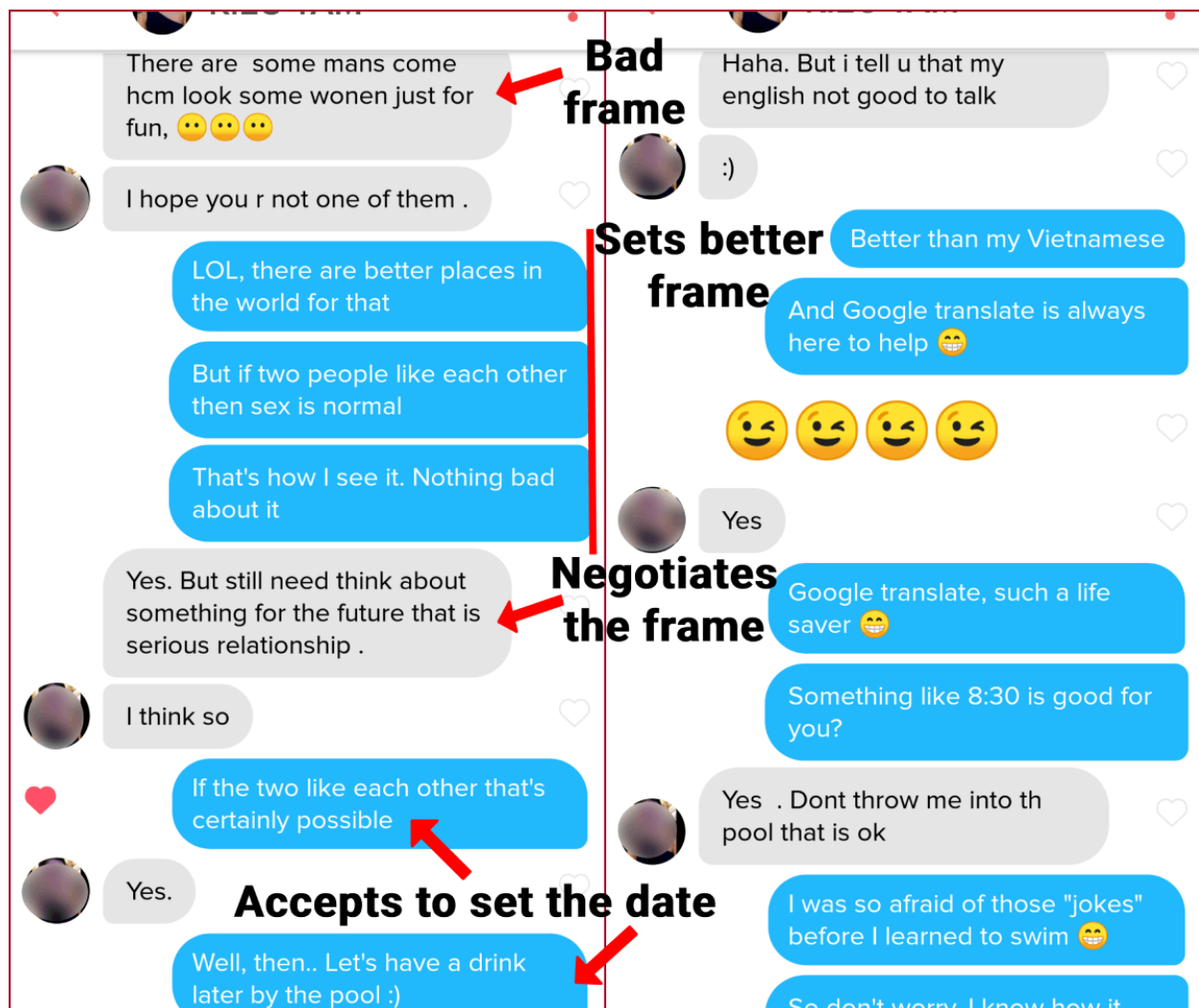
## .. But Most of The Times Don't Make it a War of Frames

However, most of the times, avoid making it a “frame war”.

It's best to have a “negotiating the frame mindset”, where you get what you want while also giving others something valuable.

You can't win all the frames and, even if you could, remember: people don't like being vanquished and bulldozed.

See an example here from a Tinder conversation:



I had to reject her frame or I would go down the slow-moving boyfriend zone or even friend zone. But a focus on “winning the frame” would have most likely destroyed the interaction. By negotiating the frame instead I get her to come over to my place.

Your goal is always that, by accepting your frame, people feel better.

Focus on making people *want* to *join* your point of view.  
And when people *willingly* play by your rules, your power is boundless.

## #4. Soft Power – The Judge Role

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyKLPnFBRWk>

In most relationships in your life, you will not deal with coercive power. You will deal with “soft power”.

Good conversationalists, people who understand psychology and good salesmen are all good at wielding soft power.

But, pardon me the cacophony, the most powerful version of soft power goes to the individual who judges others.  
That’s why from now on I will call it “the judge role” -or “the judge”-.

You gain judging powers when people accept your frame and your authority (as we said: most forms of power are connected).  
The judge wields power by dispensing (emotional) punishment and rewards ([French & Raven, 1959](#)).

### Theoretical Warning:

Don’t worry if it sounds too theoretical: this is a high-level lesson and this course will provide you with all the concrete examples as we go forward.



The power of judgment provides rewards in the form of compliments, happiness, and acceptance.

And it delivers punishment with withdrawal, criticism, scorn or, more subtly and even more powerfully, with unhappiness, unacceptance and disappointment.

“Disappointment” is the judge superpower.

Watch out when people use it against you.

You can recognize the effects when:

1. You feel the pressure to change your behavior
2. You feel the pressure to ask for forgiving
3. You feel crushed and you need to get in his/her good grace ASAP
4. You feel the pressure to change your stated opinion

Sometimes the effects of the judge’s disappointment are swift and drastic, taking the form of major U-turns.

Here is one example:



C [redacted]

last seen today at 07:02



and switch :-)

19:46 ✓✓

Look C [redacted] I understand your point but at the same time I can't deny of feeling disappointed

19:47 ✓✓

I'm very sorry, I should have thought about this before saying helping you.. I was impulsive in the previous message.. I am struggled and still need more time to think about it:-((

19:58

AUGUST 3, 2017

Hi Lucio, after thinking I think I am the person who did wrong. I said I wanted to help but in the end I broke the promise. I really didn't mean to 'bait and switch', I have never thought about that.. I



Type a message



And when a U-turn takes place a power relation has been stated aloud: the U-turner has (almost officially) submitted and the disappointed party has become the undisputed leader.

Emotional abusers almost always take some for of the judge role, so I must make a note here:

**Please Note: Healthy VS Abusive Judge**

A healthy judge role only expresses disappointment in the presence of *real* and *deep* reasons.

Expressing disappointment on a constant basis is an abuse of power and tantamount to emotional manipulation.

See an example here from Mary Cain:

This is an extreme case of emotional abuse from a judge role. It's not too dissimilar from the dynamics of sexual abuse, which leads to trauma bonding.

Mary Cain was abused by Nike's leading trainer who constantly criticized her. And she still wanted to go back. She says she "craved his approval". She is right. And that's an example of trauma bonding from soft power and judge position.

Abusive forms of soft power work less well with more powerful and more high-quality individuals. Instead, high-quality expressions of power work on everyone.

However, it works with enough people that more unscrupulous individuals can successfully use soft power to control others.

Deciding to be a good leader sometimes is a decision based on personal values, not because it necessarily pays better:

*Sometimes the biggest difference between a low-quality abuser and a high-quality, powerful individual lays in your moral compass only.*

## Parent/Child And The Judge

There is an overlap between the judge role and the parent/child relationship of transactional analysis.

When children get rebellious in their teens they are rebelling not much against hard rules, but against the soft power of judgment.

Teenagers are claiming their *emotional* independence from their parents.

Children with very demanding and judgemental parents sometimes stay stuck in emotionally dependent child roles throughout their lives (to learn more, check "[Will I Ever Be Good Enough](#)").

A similar dynamic of parent/child can be replicated in adult relationships.

When you become the judge in adult relationships your power is to make the judged emotionally dependent on your approval, a bit like children are dependent on parents' approval.

This can be a source of extremely powerful dark social power.

### **PRO Tip: Watch Out For Highly Critical Individuals**

Consciously or unconsciously, people who are very severe and demanding are trying to take a judge role and push you in the emotionally dependent child role.

If they are highly skilled and you learning a lot, it might even be OK for a while -as long as you are aware of it!-.

But sometimes the judge role just goes to the person who starts judging first. You must be watchful and reject any early attempt at controlling you via emotional rewards and punishments.

## **Who Proves to Whom**

The judge is the party that makes others “prove themselves to him”. Proving yourself to others is a major sign of (emotional) dependence and submission.

We will see examples during the course.

## **Who Makes Whom Happy**

The other superpower of the judge role is the “right of happiness”.

This sometimes happens in relationships, with the woman becoming the judge and the man who takes on the onus of making her happy. We will have a lesson on how that happens + examples.

## **The Shaming Superpower**

The judge role is also the platform to launch what I call “shame attacks”.

Shame attacks are a form of coercive power because they threaten to ostracize people not just from the judge, but from the whole group of reference.

In our archaic past ostracizing was the equivalent of a death threat - not anymore today but our brains haven't caught up yet-.

The most obvious and direct shame attacks use emotional constructs such as “evil”, “dishonorable”, “disgusting”, “slutty”, “not good enough (for us)” that aim at browbeating and isolating the victim.

Needless to say, people deploying shame attacks are often using them simply as a tool of power, and not because they're really any better than you.

Shame attacks can push you so much on the defensive that you can end up relinquish any counterattack in exchange for forgiving. And when you do that, you become putty in the hands of the attacker.

We will see examples of shame attacks and how to defend against them.

## **Identity-Based Shame Attacks**

The nastiest shame attacks seek to undermine us at the core of our identities.

Our identities differ from person to person, but some key traits are common to most of us.

Almost all men, for example, are partial to any attack to their “sense of being a man”.

And almost all women are easy marks for attacks to beauty, femininity, and sexual behavior.

## **#5. The Power Dynamics Of Social Effort**

“Effort” is the measure of how much people are willing to invest to keep engaging with you.

I will use “investment” and “effort” interchangeably throughout the course because they are similar.

Social effort is an umbrella term which, in practice, can take all different kinds of forms.

Here are some examples:

1. Talking more to keep the interaction going
2. Walking across the room to say hi
3. Giving gifts without receiving any back

In a nutshell: the person who invests less looks more powerful. and the person who expends more effort looks less powerful.

**Least powerful are those who expend lots of effort for little or no returns.**

Paul Cicero in Goodfellas is an extreme example of the power dynamics of effort.

By moving little while others move lots for him, he is the living embodiment of power.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_vUUdRsDgVA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vUUdRsDgVA)

## **#6. Power And Resources In Our Society**

Finally, in our society, there is a strong relationship between resources and power.

Very rich individuals are more often than not friends and formal or informal advisers of top politicians and they have preferential access to formal and informal levers of power.

Very rich individuals also enjoy more “exceptions”: the law should theoretically apply independently of income, power, and resources, but you probably already know that’s often not the case.

**In our society, lots of resources confer much more power than lots of physical strength.**

This pretty obvious just by looking at any super-rich individual moving around town, with the rich and powerful using the (supposedly) physical strength of (relatively low paid) bodyguards.

The bodyguards' job is to sell their bodies and risk their own lives and health to preserve the lives and health of the rich.

In a nutshell: resources *are* power.  
And growing your income can be a highly effective way of increasing your power as well.

## **The Power of Living On Your Terms**

Resources or independent streams of income also confer independence from outside power sources.

Powerful people either don't have official authorities above them, have lots of power themselves, or have enough room to call their own shots.

When you can become independent of outside authorities you also grow your inner confidence which, in turn, also feeds into social power (and personal happiness, I would say).

I quote Nassim Nicholas Taleb here:

*(resources) shield you from prostituting your mind and frees you from outside authority—any outside authority.*

## **Faking, Being & Appearing**

In social power there is quite a lot of room to “artificially inflate” one's own power.

And inflated power, often, doesn't make that power any less real.  
As someone said: perceptions are reality.



Games people play lie at the intersection of being, faking and appearing.

But faking and being are not antithetic as some might think. Many powerful people who *actually* have power, are also the ones who take the most care of their appearances.

And those who don't, are leaving power on the table. This course will also help you with both.