

An Introduction of Power Basis Theory: Definition of Power and Fungibility

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The literature offers divergent definitions of power. Based on a power-as-need perspective, researchers observed various psychological and behavioral implications resulting from pursuing power. However, the power-as-need perspective has difficulty to account for why various types of power can be effective or to present fundamental principles in guiding the dynamics of power. I introduced a power basis theory (Pratto et al., 2010), in which we offered a definition of power and delineated three basic principles in power dynamics. Power is defined as the relative ability to meet one's needs in one's ecological field. The basis in which a person's particular need is evaluated is called power basis. According to power basis theory, because power corresponds to one's needs, one's sensitivity to a given need affects one's perceived power in the given power basis. Furthermore, different types of power can be effective in terms of how they fulfill or deprive of others' needs. Social perceptions of powerholders may differ on the levels of perceived trustworthiness in terms of how powerholders use power. Powerholders who use power to fulfill others' needs are perceived to be trustworthy, whereas those who use power to deprive of others' needs are perceived to be untrustworthy. Lastly, because human beings have different needs, a person's power can be fungible. When people have one particular type of power, they are more likely to have other types of power, resulting in actual power fungibility. When information is lacking, powerholders are more likely to be assumed having different types of power; such a phenomenon is called perceived power fungibility. Three studies were conducted to test whether (1) power corresponds to needs but pursuing power is not a need, (2) superiority in a given power basis is related to perceived power, and (3) when powerholders enjoy superiority in a given power basis, there is evidence for perceived power fungibility. Indeed, participants' self-ratings data showed that the more a need is satisfied, the higher one's life satisfaction is (Study 1). Moreover, superiority in a given power basis increased perceived power, supporting the power definition offered by power basis theory (Study 2). When controlling for actual power, the more the powerholders were viewed with one type of power, the more they were viewed with other types of power, providing evidence for perceived power fungibility (Study 3). Evidence regarding power and gender was presented and further implications of power basis theory were discussed.

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