

EXPERIENCED POWER – ROLE OF AGE AND OCCUPATION FOR THE CONSTRUCT OF EXPERIENCE

Researcher Tytti Solankallio & Assistant Professor Sofia Kauko-Valli
University of Jyväskylä, P.O. BOX 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
e-mail:tytti.solankallio@jyu.fi

INTRODUCTION

Power has been traditionally associated with coercive and controlling patterns in social life. It has been studied earlier mainly through the negative aspects of it such as subjugation and conflicts at work. It is often defined as a relationship between the powerful one who has control over the powerless one (Dunbar, Bippus & Young 2008; Foucault 1980; Lukes 1974). More recently scholars in the field of communication especially, have stated that both power and dominance are fundamental structures in all human relationships (Dunbar, Bippus & Young 2008; Burgoon & Hale 1984; Foucault 1980; Jacobson 1986; Olson & Cromwell 1975). This being the case it can be said that power may have many meanings depending on the context where it is used; however the subjective experience and construct of power has not been explored in detail earlier. In this paper power is not seen only as the ability to influence another person (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000), but also as a positive and productive force (i.e. A and B being each enabled as well as constrained within relations of power, Knights & Willmott 2004) possibly empowering all parties involved.

More recently scholars in communication and related fields have stated that power and dominance are fundamental structures in all human relationships (Dunbar, Bippus & Young 2008; Burgoon & Hale 1984; Foucault 1980; Jacobson 1986; Olson & Cromwell 1975). Many theories, also dyadic power theory (DPT), show that power and dominance are visible in relational communication between individuals. Burgoon & Dunbar (2000) claim further that dominance is a communication strategy, which is based on relational interaction and it is guided by person's motives and the context where the individuals are involved in. Like Ojanen (2001; see also Burgoon et al. 1998; Rogers-Millar & Millar 1979) suggests, dominance may be related to individual trait or temperament. Dominance is seen as an ability to take initiative and leadership and refers to context and interactional patterns in which person tends to dominate others.

BACKGROUND

The dyadic power theory provides the basis for understanding the power elements in communication. According to Dunbar (2004) power exists between individuals and becomes visible in interaction among them. Power is seen as potential to take action in order to maintain ones desirable goal. It is capacity to influence the others in a way that one takes action even she/he would not normally do so. Russell (1938) claims that "the fundamental concept in social science is Power; in the same way that Energy is the fundamental concept in physics".

The dyadic power theory suggests that power can be approached through seven slightly different dimensions as reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, expert power, informational power and credibility. The first five dimensions were

originally created by French & Raven (1959) and Dunbar later synthesized different power theories to create DPT by adding both informational power and credibility (Dunbar 2004).

Each of these dimensions indicate the form power is created. They are connected to individuals' personal capabilities or status. For example expert power consists of series of complex abilities and professional skills of the person in question. These abilities and skills create respect among others and also give the person a possibility to have power over others. The power exists as a possibility and it depends on the situation and the context whether or not power will be used. Power usage also is related on personal temperament and overall personality (Dunbar 2004).

METHODS

The contribution of this study is in its novel way of combining quantitative methods and qualitative research. The method allows for quantitative analysis, but still the results concentrate on understanding the uniqueness of subjective experiences. As the cognitive constructive approach knowledge states experiences are both individually and socially constructed. On the every day level we all have practical experiences of this. We can talk about willpower for instance, but when the dialogue is over we discover that we have meant slightly different things. In essence the holistic, system dynamic view (Kauko-Valli 2008) allows seeing into what having power as willpower, power of decision and dominance feels like on the phenomenological level. As experience is also socially constructed we were interested how, if at all, the experience differs in different subcultures of occupation and age.

An internet based survey (N=751) was conducted using a well established descriptive visual analogue scale (DVAS) (Ojanen 2005; Kauko-Valli 2008) covering different dimensions of interest. The scale has been used in several studies earlier with fairly good results (e.g. Sjögren, Nissinen, Järvenpää, Ojanen, Vanharanta & Mäkiä 2006) and has been assessed both for validity and reliability. The sample represented well the overall working age adults and was balanced in regards to age, gender and background education of respondents, so the findings could be generalized to the whole population. Out of the 751 participants 42.6% were women and 57.4% were men, their age averaging on 42 years. Both groups in the current study (employees N=535, entrepreneurs N=216) were divided and analyzed as subgroups by age (under 35 years old and 45 years or older). Instead of establishing clear cut cause-effect relationships or building predictive models the aim was to look closely at the two-way correlation relationships to understand more clearly the role of subjective evaluations of reality for power experience. A system dynamic approach (Kauko-Valli 2008) was used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

In this study experienced power was looked at as an individually and socially constructed phenomenon. Borrowing from the cognitive constructive tradition the interest lied in understanding what having power means and whether age or occupation is reflected in the experience. Power was interpreted as having willpower, power of decision and an overall orientation towards dominance. Whereas all individuals make meaning of their experience individually the social setting may also influence their evaluations.

In the current study power was defined as including elements of willpower, power of decision and dominance. The experienced level of willpower was looked at from the perspective of being able to perform successfully in tasks that are important to the person in question. Dominance was approached as ones ability to take initiative and leadership, especially in new situations. Power of decision refers to the overall willingness and ability to make decisions on different aspects of daily affairs independently. (Ojanen 2001.) These three components of power are included in the dyadic power theory (DPT) (Dunbar 2004).

Table 1. Willpower profiles in the studied groups

Employees ≥ 45 years	Entrepreneurs ≥ 45 years	Employees <35 years
Self-efficacy .483	Self-efficacy .512	Self-efficacy .452
Activity .428	Gratitude .511	Appreciation .442
Sense of peace .420	Sense of peace .485	Sense of peace .423
Appreciation of self .396	Appreciation of self .456	Variation in environm. .379
Power of decision .392	Mood .403	Power of decision .363
Appreciation .349	Activity .398	Challenges/resourc. .342

All presented correlations are on the $p \leq .001$ level. Employees >45 N= 352, Entrepreneurs >45 N= 216, Employees <35 N= 183.

For employees who were 45 years or older willpower was connected to a sense of self-efficacy (.483), activity (.428), sense of peace (.420), appreciation of self (.396), power of decision (.392) and being appreciated by others (.349). As correlations work both ways it can be seen that for example viewing oneself in a more favorable way i.e. appreciating self may influence the sense of experienced willpower. It is notable that both real changes and perceived changes may be at play on the phenomenological level.

Comparing older employees with older entrepreneurs (different occupational culture) and younger employees (different age related culture) it can be seen that willpower in each studied group was constructed as self-efficacy and sense of peace. Appreciation of self and activity connects the older employees and entrepreneurs and power of decision and being appreciated by others those working in a similar occupational culture. For older entrepreneurs gratitude and mood were connected to willpower whereas for younger entrepreneurs variation offered in the environment and a balance between challenges and resources was of essence in their experienced willpower.

Table 2. Power of decision profiles in the studied groups.

Employees ≥ 45 years	Entrepreneurs ≥ 45 years	Employees <35 years
Appreciation .513	Satisfaction in life .522	Self-efficacy .475
Self-efficacy .464	Challenges/Resources .518	Appreciation .436
Appreciation of self .428	Roles .487	Flexibility .426
Meaning of life .420	Happiness .484	Appreciation of self .402
Sense of peace .404	Quality of work .448	Hope .379
Willpower .392	Meaning of life .437	Sense of safety .367

All presented correlations are on the $p \leq .001$ level. Employees >45 N= 352, Entrepreneurs >45 N= 216, Employees <35 N= 183.

For employees who were 45 years or older power of decision was connected to being appreciated by others (.513), self-efficacy (.464), appreciation of self (.428), meaning of life (.420) sense of peace (.404) and willpower (.392). Increased sense of peace may increase the sense of power of decision but it is equally possible that actual increases in power of decision increase the experienced sense of peace. Here again it is notable that experienced power of decision is connected to both real changes in experience and to perceived changes.

Comparing older employees with older entrepreneurs (different occupational culture) and younger employees (different age related culture) it can be seen that power of decision is constructed differently in each studied group. Meaning of life connects the older employees and entrepreneurs and being appreciated by others, self-efficacy and appreciation of self those working in a similar occupational culture. For older entrepreneurs satisfaction in life (.522), experienced balance between challenges and resources (.518), balance between different roles in life (.487), happiness (.484) and overall quality of life were connected to power of decision. For younger employees flexible attitude to life (.426), hope (.379) and sense of safety (.367) were connected to power of decision.

Table 3. Dominance profiles in the studied groups.

Employees ≥ 45 years	Entrepreneurs ≥ 45 years	Employees <35 years
Self-efficacy .396	Self-efficacy .403	Self-efficacy .340
Willpower .337	Sense of control .367	Activity .263
Activity .322	Quality of work .351	Willpower .253
Appreciation of self .282	Willpower .334	Awareness of self .232
Awareness of self .275	Appreciation of self .309	Curiosity .227
Power of decision .262	Curiosity .289	Appreciation of self .209

All presented correlations are on the $p \leq .001$ level. Employees >45 N= 352, Entrepreneurs >45 N= 216, Employees <35 N= 183.

The employees aged 45 and older experienced elements of power and dominance connected with several elements connected together. Self-efficacy (.396) and appreciation of self (.282) played the most significant role; also activity (.322) was highlighted. The results implicate the meaning and appreciation of self being important to employees. Also when experiencing strong self-efficacy and feeling centered the employees seem to experience abilities of willpower and dominance so that they are willing to be in charge and having the power of decision in order to make things happen in their work.

The entrepreneurs aged 45 and older pointed out elements as self-efficacy (.403), quality of work (.351), and appreciation of self (.309) when experiencing power in their lives. The results implicate that the entrepreneurs feel that the power is in their own hands and they can influence themselves directly to their own lives. Appreciation of the others did not play meaningful role in studied group. Experiencing self-efficacy and appreciation of self the entrepreneurs had the sense of willpower and sense of control and dominance which all had a strong impact to their experienced quality of work. That result was highly different compared to the other groups.

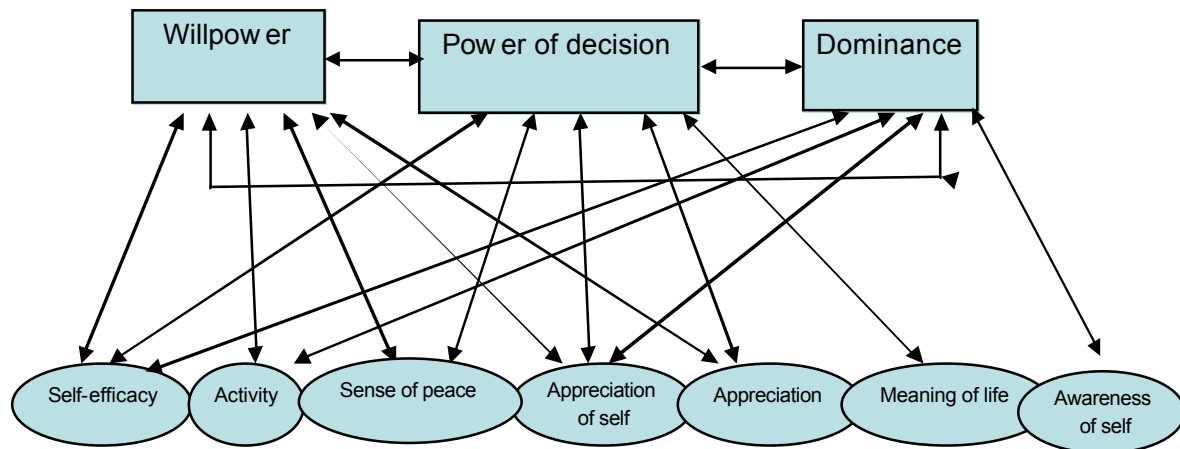
In this study the entrepreneurs under 35 years of age were also examined. Their reflections to power were not much different than the both older groups, the group of 45

years and older entrepreneurs and employees. The younger ones had a strong bonding with experienced self-efficacy (.340) and activity (.263). Elements like curiosity (.227) and appreciation of self (209) were highlighted.

As an overall result it may be easier to the entrepreneurs studied here to take actions more freely than it is to the employees. The experienced appreciation on self and lacking the appreciation by others on the other hand arose in all studied groups regardless the age or occupation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Table 4. System dynamic model on experienced power among employees over 45 years of age (N= 352)



People experiencing strong sense of self-efficacy, appreciation of self, appreciation, sense on peace and activity are likely to take action in their lives. They will sense willpower and dominance in a way that it encourages them to make decisions by having strong sense of power of decision. The elements showed above in system dynamic model show that the elements intertwine and have correlations both ways. Also can be said that by doing so individual empowerment arises.

It can be seen that there may be some variation in the experience in regards to occupation and age. Looking at the two-way correlations reveals that for older employees (45 years and older) experience of power as willpower, power of decision and dominance is connected to self efficacy and appreciation of self especially.

According to Kauko-Valli (2008) the following dimensions were used to explain the construct of well-being: Elements connected to the individual, to the environment and to the person-environment fit. First elements connected to the individual consist personal orientation in life and questions on happiness, satisfaction with life, gratitude, hope,

mood, anxiety, meaning of life, flexibility, optimism, willpower, dominance, activity and need for variation. Many of these dimensions arose in this study also. Future research might be interested in taking a closer look on connection of these elements and experienced empowerment.

Limitations of the study are involved with broad strokes in interpreting the occupational culture as employees or entrepreneurs? Future research could take a closer look at the cultures within actual occupational groups (nurses, teachers, fire-fighters etc.) Also authority and possibilities to decision making individually was not studied here.

References

- Burgoon, J. K. & Dunbar, N. E. 2000. An interactionist perspective on dominance-submission: Interpersonal dominance as a dynamic, situationally contingent social skill. *Communication Monographs*, 67, 96-121.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hale, J. L. 1984. The fundamental topoi of relational communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 193-214.
- Burgoon, J. K., Johnson, M. L. & Koch, P. T. 1998. The nature and measurement of interpersonal dominance. *Communication Monographs*, 65, 308-335.
- Dunbar, N. E. 2004. Dyadic Power Theory: Constructing a Communication-Based Theory of Relational Power. *The Journal of Family Communication* 4, 235-248.
- Dunbar, N. E., Bippus, A. M. & Young S. L. 2008. Interpersonal dominance in relational conflict: a view from dyadic power theory. *Interpersona* 2 (1), 1-33.
- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. London: Tavistock.
- Jacobson, G. F. 1986. Power dynamics in love and marriage. *Psychiatric Annals* 16, 647-649.
- Kauko-Valli, S. 2008. Subjective Well-Being as an Individually Constructed Phenomenon. *Jyvaskyla Studies in Business and Economics* 63.
- Knights, D. & Willmott, H. 2004. *Management Lives. Power and Identity in Work Organizations*. London: Sage.
- Lukes, S. 1973. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan.
- Mack, D. E. 1974. The power relationship in black families and white families. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30, 409-413.
- Nesler, M. S., Aguinis, H., Quigley, B. M., Lee, S. & Tedeschi, J. T. 1999. The development and validation of a scale measuring global social power based on French and Raven's (1959) power taxonomy. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 29, 750-771.
- Ojanen, M. 2001. Graphical analogy scales measuring quality of life and well-being. In Talo, S. (Ed.) *Functioning – from the frame of reference to assessment and measurement*. Turku: The Social Insurance Institution in Finland. *Social Security and Health Reports* 49, 207-225.
- Ojanen, M. 2005. Personal information by e-mail. 08.09.2005.
- Olson, D. H. & Cromwell, R. E. 1975. Power in families. In R. E. Cromwell & D. H. Olson (Eds.) *Power in Families*. Beverly Hills: Sage. 3-11.
- Rogers-Millar, E. L. & Millar, F. E. 1979. Domineeringness and dominance: A transactional view. *Human Communication Research*, 5, 238-246.

Russell, B. 1938. *Power: A new social analysis*. New York: Norton.

Sjögren, T., Nissinen, K., Järvenpää, S., Ojanen, M., Vanharanta, H. & Mälkiä, E. 2006. Effects of a physical exercise intervention on subjective physical well-being, psychosocial functioning and general well-being among office workers: A cluster randomized-controlled cross-over design. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports* 16, 381-390.