

# I

## Concepts of Power

Power is a word the meaning of which we do not understand.

—Leo Tolstoy

The concept of power is uncommonly intriguing and maddeningly elusive. In this chapter, I sketch a general notion of power; distinguish between power-to and power-over; catalog competing notions of what constitutes a person's interests and how they connect to invocations of power; briefly discuss passive power and distinguish exerting influence from exercising power; introduce ideas about social power; and define and illustrate three major uses of power-over.

### A General Notion of Power

We use the term *power* appropriately to refer to a host of different, sometimes overlapping concepts.<sup>1</sup> At its most general, *power is the capability to produce or contribute to the production of outcomes*. Understood at this level, power is not necessarily relational—that is, it does not require at least two parties one of which is superior in capability to the other; power does not necessarily require a social setting to gain its meaning or to animate its structure; power does not necessarily generate resistance or opposition or a conflict of interests that the agent must overcome; nor does the exercise of power require a demonstrated intention.

For example, imagine an adult human being, Muffin, shipwrecked alone on a deserted island. Muffin will have numerous powers antecedent to arriving on the island. To name only a few: the power to walk; to lift weight of certain poundage; to speak a language; to sing; to write; to conceive countless ideas; and to interact with the environment in a variety

of ways. Moreover, Muffin may develop any of these powers further while residing on the island. Our stranded mariner may also discover powers that she was previously unaware of possessing. Imagine Muffin stubbing her toe on a sharp object and shrieking maniacally. With no intention to do so and unaware that she could do so, the shriek amounts to a musical high C note, whose sound waves smash a nearby tumbler that Muffin had carried to the island. The result was unintended and Muffin was unaware of her power to produce such a note, but at this point she discovers the power. Thus, Muffin literally did not know her own power, at least in this regard.

Also, we may have power utterly independent of or even at odds with our immediate desires and long-range preferences. Thus, a person may have the power to sing well but be indifferent to exercising or even possessing that power. Another person may have the power to compose poetry while thoroughly disdaining that art form.

Finally, power at this level can be possessed by inanimate forces. Hurricanes have tremendous power to produce outcomes unwelcomed by human beings, as do various types of weather upon the crops of farmers. Thus, Muffin not only possesses certain powers but is also subject to a host of environmental powers while on the island.

This nonsocial rendering of power is crushingly uninteresting, probably because it is the most general concept connoted by the term. But it does illustrate several useful aspects of power: that power is a capability or disposition, thus someone can possess a certain power but not exercise it; that possessing power implies the actualization of a potential—we learn to walk, to speak a language, to sing, and the like by developing our potentials; that power does not automatically translate to domination, oppression, or subordination; that power is something almost every living and some nonliving things possess to some extent; and that to have power is typically to attain a good in some respect (e.g., the capability to produce or affect outcomes).

### The Concept of Power-Over

But those who study, write about, and argue about power are most concerned with the concept of one entity having *power over* another entity (dyadic relational power) or a significant institution having power over an individual or a class of individuals (general social power). The concern focuses on the effects of domination, oppression, and subordination in setting the terms of social life—in identifying the agents of power and those whose lives are diminished as a result of the exercise of power.

### Intentionally Changing the Behavior of Others

Here is one characterization of the relationship of power-over: "The superior has power over the subordinate when the superior successfully achieves his or her intended result by making the subordinate perform an action which the subordinate would not have done but for the superior's desire that the subordinate do it. Although the subordinate was reluctant, the superior overcomes that reluctance."<sup>2</sup>

Such a rendering will not do. First, the superior may possess power over the subordinate without ever exercising that advantage. Conflating the *ability* to exert power with its *exercise* is a mistake. Second, the superior can exercise power over the subordinate without any conscious intent. The most invidious examples of wrongful domination may be those in which the superior does not need to manifest a conscious intent in order to control the subordinate. Furthermore, exercises of power often have unintended effects for which the superior is nevertheless responsible. Third, the superior need not induce the subordinate to perform an action in order to exercise power. For example, the superior can exercise power by inducing the subordinate to refrain from acting or by constraining the subordinate's options by mystifying the subordinate's genuine interests or by limiting the number of alternative actions. If the subordinate's freedom is limited because the underling cannot perceive his or her objective well-being or situated interests or even long-term preferences because of ideological conditioning, then the superior who is responsible for this situation has exercised power without necessarily inducing the subordinate to perform a particular action. To mold the subordinate's perception of his or her interests wrongfully is an especially dangerous form of power because if successful the superior does not need to monitor the everyday activities of the underling closely in order to exert power. Fourth, even where the superior does exercise power by inducing the subordinate to perform an action it does not follow that the subordinate would not have so acted but for the superior's desire that the subordinate do so. For example, the superior in a particular circumstance may be unaware of the specific situation and thus have no desire about how the subordinate might act; yet the subordinate, unable to identify his or her interests, voluntarily does precisely what the superior would have wanted done had the superior thought about it.

Also, there is a technical problem with simultaneous causation. Suppose two independent superiors both possess power over the same subordinate. They both act simultaneously to induce the subordinate to perform a particular action. In this hypothetical, even if the first superior had not

exerted power the subordinate would still have acted as he or she did because of the power exerted by the second superior, and even if the second superior had not exerted power the subordinate would still have acted as he or she did because of the power exerted by the first superior. Thus, it cannot be said of either superior that the subordinate would not have acted as he or she did but for *that* superior's desire that the subordinate do so.

Finally, the rendering of power-over at issue assumes that the subordinate will be reluctant to do as the superior desires and will offer resistance of some intensity and kind. But subordinates who cannot identify their genuine interests or who are naturally submissive or who are intoxicated by the spell cast by their superiors may willingly and enthusiastically perform actions that their superiors desire. In such cases, acquiescence and consent replace resistance and conflict.

But this characterization of power-over implicitly embodies a paramount truth: superiors can exercise power over subordinates without oppressing them. Nothing in this characterization of power-over implies that the exertion of power must be *against* the interests of the subordinate party. On the contrary, superiors can exercise power over subordinates in ways that advance the interests of underlings. This may occur through paternalistic intervention—when a superior exerts power over a subordinate that advances the subordinate's interests in circumstances where the subordinate cannot identify his or her genuine interests through no fault of the superior. The ignorant subordinate may even resist mightily doing what is in his or her interests but the superior's power may win the day. Thus, wise parents may exercise power over their children and induce them to eat more nutritiously or gain needed bed rest despite the protestations of their offspring.

Moreover, superiors may exert power over subordinates in order to develop the talents of the subordinates to the point where the influence of superiors is no longer required. Again, nurturing parents aspire to transform their children into fully functioning, capable, powerful adults; caring teachers tend to their students with the aim that their tutelage will be rendered obsolete as their pupils become their own best teachers. Although power-over is intuitively understood as wrongful domination or oppression, that should not obscure the fact that power may be exerted over a subordinate in ways that advance their genuine interests or transform their characters beneficially.

#### Exercising Power to Change the Behavior of Subordinates

Consider an intuitively appealing, closely-related definition of the *exercise* of power-over: One party exercises power over another party to the extent that

the first gets the second to do something that the second party would not otherwise do.<sup>3</sup> Although plausible, this is also unsuccessful as a satisfactory definition of power-over. First, subordinates experience the lash of power not only when they are compelled to do certain things but also when they are prevented from pursuing particular projects. Superiors can exert power over subordinates in ways other than by explicitly changing the behavior of subordinates. For example, superiors may be able to prevent an issue tightly connected to the well-being of subordinates from being deliberated and acted upon. Although the overt behavior of subordinates has not been altered, the superiors may well have exerted power over them. On this account, a superior party exercises power over a subordinate party when the superior's preferences prevail over the contrary preferences of the subordinate, but also when the superior is able to control "the agenda, mobilizing the bias of the system, determining which issues are 'key' issues, indeed which issues come up for decision, and excluding those which threaten the interests of the powerful."<sup>4</sup>

Second, often subordinates misidentify their own interests and willingly comply with the prerogatives of power. Thus, power is not exercised only where the subordinate would have done otherwise but for a superior's exercise of power. Power is most forceful when it is able to secure the acquiescence of its victims or when it suppresses latent conflict. Third, there is again the technical problem of simultaneous causation (see above). Fourth, this definition presupposes the existence of (at least) latent conflict, which may in fact be absent where the superior party has secured the consent of the subordinate party through broader exercises of power. Finally, determining what the second party would otherwise have done, how he or she would have acted but for the invention by the first party, will often be problematic if not impossible.

In sum, the suggestion that getting someone to do something that the person would not otherwise do is also an inadequate definition because often that effect can be realized without the capability or exercise of power. For example, someone without any power over another may sway their behavior through the use of persuasive arguments or nonthreatening requests or by pointing out previously unforeseen consequences of the action that the other had contemplated. Thus, getting someone to do something that they would not otherwise do is not a sufficient condition of another person exercising power over that someone. In addition, a person could exercise power over another person without changing their behavior. For example, a prison warden has power over prisoners and may issue orders that they be subject to harsher treatment and fewer privileges, but those decrees do not automatically change the future behavior of the prisoners. Thus, getting

someone to do something that they would not otherwise do is not a necessary condition of another person exercising power over that someone.

To expand on some of these objections: The effectiveness of power cannot simply be measured by intentional actions that produce outcomes wherein superiors prevail in policy or zero-sum choice situations in which the interests of superiors and subordinates conflict. Power is most effective where it is least transparent. For example, social structures that limit decision making to trivial matters permitting only marginal adjustment and incremental change foster a sense of consensus at the cost of truncating genuine, possibly fruitful, conflict. By shaping community values and procedures for dispute resolution, such institutional structures stifle latent power conflicts by promoting obstacles to public deliberation. The result is a fragile consensus that appears to be genuine but is in fact the outcome of a social process that masks potentially serious differences.

In that vein, the greatest power is that which secures the consent of subordinates to their own oppression. Here conflict, resistance, and rebellion do not arise, because those who are oppressed embody false consciousness: they are unable to identify their genuine interests and what would nurture their objective well-being and, instead, become unwitting collaborators in their own miserable situation. Of course, this is a familiar theme in Marxist thought: the dominant class has control over the ideological apparatus that supports the economic structure in place; culture and ideology disseminate messages that the underclass internalizes; and in this fashion, the ideological superstructure domesticates the potentially revolutionary impulses of the oppressed. The oppressed are largely unaware of their genuine interests because of the mystification and repression of the dominant ideology and the lack of available alternate ideological frameworks. The dominant ideology socializes oppressed people to internalize values and practices that legitimate their own subordination. The status quo is portrayed as appropriate, natural, and even necessary. By masking the true sources of its own messages—the needs of an economic system and the prerogatives of the dominant classes—the prevalent ideology mystifies the process and encourages the oppressed to misidentify their own genuine interests. Moreover, inertia and force reinforce the status quo, as the dominant class also controls military and police forces. Also, the material condition of the oppressed is just comfortable enough to encourage their acquiescence, but not so robust as to yield equal and opposite power to that held by the dominant class. Finally, rebellion and resistance are costly, and the oppressed typically lack the required resources to mount significant rebellion.<sup>5</sup>

Through this process, the dominant class shapes the perceptions, social circumstances, and preferences of the oppressed and facilitates false consciousness. With their judgment skewed, the oppressed accept the familiar as the inevitable and an atmosphere of false necessity prevails. By securing the consent of the oppressed to their own oppression, superiors possessing power are able to obscure its mechanisms and limit its overt exercise. Although no such system is completely effective and pockets of resistance will always exist, acquiescence on the part of the oppressed is sufficient and general enough to stymie wholesale rebellion.

#### Adversely Affecting the Interests of Subordinates

Another intuitive rendering of the exercise of power-over: One party exercises power over another party when the first affects the second in a manner contrary to the second party's interests.<sup>6</sup> This, too, is insufficient. First, superiors can exert power over subordinates in ways that not only do not set back the subordinates' interests but also intentionally advance those interests. Again, paternalistic exercises of power and interventions aimed at empowering subordinate parties are common. Second, even when one party does affect a second party in a manner that sets back that person's interests it does not follow that power-over has been exerted. For example, imagine that Leonardo is dramatically enjoying a cheeseburger as he walks along the street. He passes a stranger, Zerblonski, who is taken by how much pleasure the food is producing. Zerblonski decides to purchase a cheeseburger for herself. Unfortunately, she has extraordinary high cholesterol and severe heart disease. She has been warned to avoid all high-fat, red meat food. Zerblonski gobbles down the burger and her interests are immediately set back: she has a heart attack and is rushed to a hospital. Leonardo has unwittingly affected Zerblonski in a manner contrary to Zerblonski's interests, but he has not thereby exerted power over her. Instead, he has unknowingly and unintentionally influenced a stranger to do that which is against her own interests. Thus, to affect another person detrimentally (or beneficially) is not necessarily to exert power over her. To put the point in logical terms: to assert correctly that one party has affected a second party in a manner contrary to (or favorable to) the second party's interests is not a sufficient condition for concluding that the first party has exercised power over the second party.

However, to detail the inadequacies of traditional renderings of power should not lead us to ignore their insights. As Steven Lukes points out:

The effects of power seem clearly to bear some relation to intention and will: someone whose actions regularly subvert his intentions and wants can scarcely be called powerful. The outcome of resistance is certainly relevant where comparisons of power are at issue. Affecting behavior is certainly a centrally important form of power, though not all such affecting is power and not all power is such affecting. The cooperative and communicative aspect of empowerment certainly requires attention, as do the ways in which power maintains social systems and advances conflicting collective interests within them.<sup>7</sup>

### Human Interests

To this point, I have used the term *interests* as if it was unproblematic and its meaning was obvious. This is far from the case. Before we continue, I must sketch different understandings of what constitutes a person's interests. The notion of a person's interests is ambiguous. Here are a few alternatives:

1. My interests may be understood as *the fulfillment of my current desires*: to fulfill my current desire to eat potato chips by providing me a large bag is to advance my interests in this sense.
2. My interests may also be understood as *the fulfillment of my long-term preferences*: to fulfill my current desire may well conflict with my long-term preferences. Thus, my current desire to eat potato chips conflicts with my long-term preferences for physical health and a trim figure. If so, by helping to fulfill my current desire you have set back my long-term preferences and thereby thwarted my interests in this sense. Thus, I may be currently interested in and have a desire for something that is not in my long-term interests to pursue.
3. My interests may be understood as *the set of preferences I would develop if I were choosing under ideal conditions*. Such an imagined state would be free from distorting influences such as external pressure, adverse circumstances, lack of information, and societal conditioning. In this hypothetical state, I would still be an individual—thus, we would not all choose the same things in the same way—but the results of

the experiment may well produce some long-term preferences that conflict with the actual long-term preferences and current desires that I now embody and express.

4. My interests may also be understood as *what nurtures my objective well-being*. On this rendering, my actual or hypothetical desires and preferences may or may not facilitate my objective well-being. Here my choices are less important than what will in fact promote my well-being. This requires a firm definition of “well-being,” one that takes into account my actual desires and preferences but does not confer upon them the status of trumps; instead, my actual desires and preferences gain currency only when they advance, or at least do not conflict with, my objective well-being, which defines what is in my *genuine* interests.
5. My interests may be understood as *constitutive or situated*. These are my interests located in a particular social setting. Perhaps, my current desires, long-term preferences, and hypothetical preferences are of a certain sort, but the social setting in which I find myself encourages different desires and preferences. For example, an undergraduate may have a current desire to remain in bed and read nothing; a long-term preference to read sports magazines; a preference under ideal conditions to read higher-level sports literature; an objective interest in reading the canon of literary classics; but a situated interest to read whatever is required to fulfill the requirements of a certain class, obtain the college credit attached thereto, and progress toward an undergraduate degree. Accordingly, situated interests are explicitly focused on social settings and the roles that human beings assume therein. If a certain class requires reading Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, an excruciating experience under the best of conditions, it is in an enrolled student’s situated interest to fulfill that requirement even though he or she has no current desire and no long-range preference to do so. (That few sane people would choose to read this book while selecting under ideal conditions and that for almost all students reading the book will not advance their objective well-being I take to be stone cold truths.) The notion of constitutive interests, then, underscores the practical character of social

understandings—how acting habitually within established social practices structures human relationships.

The conflict that often arises from surveying a person's immediate desires—what the person *does* want—and comparing them to that person's expressed long-range preferences and situated interests is exacerbated when outsiders speculate on what that person *would* desire and prefer if selecting from an ideal vantage point. Such a hypothetical perspective will never be realized, and invoking it invites wholesale speculation from evaluators who may be more likely to project their own desires and preferences upon that person than they are able to extract what the individual would in fact choose. In that vein, summoning a person's genuine, objective interests invites outsiders to speculate on what that person *should* desire and prefer given a general understanding of human flourishing and well-being. This, one might argue, only amplifies the conflict further.

One solution to this conflict is to jettison appeals to loftier renderings of a person's interests and allow the individual to be the final judge of the matter unfettered by external speculations and officious intermeddling. On this view, my interests are simply what I desire and prefer, whatever subjective standards of well-being I happen to embody. Some tension would persist between my immediate, first-order desires and my long-range, second-order desires, but this discord is resolvable by use of individual autonomy and is much less severe than the conflict generated by other solutions. Thus, if my long-range preference to remain trim and physically fit does not correlate with my present desire to consume a bag of potato chips, I can judge which interest should have priority at the moment. I may well conclude that eating the junk food will not impair my long-range preference as long as I do not make it a habit. Or, knowing myself better than others do, I may judge that if I eat the chips now I will be more likely to rationalize additional imprudent consumption in the future, thereby jeopardizing my long-range preference for physical fitness. In either case, on this view, the call is mine and insofar as I have accurately identified and employed my subjective standard of well-being I have, indeed, fulfilled *my* interests.

The appealing aspects of this solution are that it simplifies matters considerably and celebrates personal autonomy thoroughly. For you to identify what is in my interests all you must do is consult me. But simplicity and ease of application are purchased at an immense cost. For example, human beings do not always act in ways that facilitate their well-being even when they understand their own subjective standards. That we sometimes tend to undermine ourselves or even incline toward self-destructive behavior is undeniable. Such phenomena may result from subconscious feelings of

guilt or unworthiness or fear of success or something more profound. But identifying specific causes is less important than the fact that the phenomena occur. To say in such cases that we are acting against our interests is reasonable. The general point is that our autonomous choices do not always correlate happily with our interests even when these are defined merely by compatibility with our own subjective standards.

Furthermore, our autonomous choices can be greatly affected by dominant societal ideas that shape us through socialization. Dominant ideas promulgated by societal institutions and practices often have disproportionate influence in molding the consciousness of typical citizens. Thus, whether our autonomous choices are truly “ours” is questionable at least sometimes.

Also, to preserve the distinction between foolish and prudent behavior, and that between reckless and wise choice, we must invoke a contrast between what a person actually chooses and what would truly advance that person’s well-being. Thus, some appeal to a wider notion of a person’s interests is necessary, a notion that goes beyond what that person actually selects. Finally, some subjective standards of well-being are simply not rationally justified. Some might be set dismally low and be unable to fulfill the needs and basic human wants of physical, emotional, and social life. A set of subjective standards might be radically at odds with justified social morality or might not embody sufficient exercise of the higher human capabilities. A set of subjective standards may also dishonor uniquely human attributes or insufficiently nurture robust self-creation.

For these reasons, the solution to conflicting notions of interests cannot be found by dismissing appeals to loftier standards of interests and replacing them by simple consultation with the subjective standards of individuals. To remain true to social reality and to retain our ability to reasonably evaluate choices and deeds, we must continue to struggle with different renderings of a person’s interests and to deny that a person’s interests are unitary and harmonious.

When I speak of affecting “interests” in what follows, I connote broadly at least one of the five senses of interests sketched above. When I speak of affecting “genuine interests” I mean more narrowly interests in senses (4) and/or (5) as adjusted for individual differences arising from sense (2).

### Power, Passivity, and Influence

I must also note that power can be passive in that a person can enjoy some favorable outcomes and attain benefits without being responsible for triggering them. Passive power, though, must be distinguished from luck. To

obtain an outcome by luck is to benefit occasionally without doing anything; thus, a farmer is lucky when the rains come at precisely the right time and in exactly the right intensity to facilitate a robust crop. The farmer exerted no influence on the weather, but simply planted his crop on his typical, annual date. Often, perhaps usually, the rains do not arrive at a propitious time or in the desired amounts. Passive power typically arises from favorable circumstances that are more systematic. An agent may lack the active power to obtain a desired outcome but get it anyway without exercising an act of will. Unlike luck, passive power involves a disposition, which is a relatively enduring capability. Thus, some people may be able to achieve a reasonable standard of living because of a strong social services network, which they did not and could not have brought about. They have the power to get certain material resources without exerting agency. These people are lucky to have been born into such a social context but once in that setting they systematically benefit in certain ways without being responsible for those outcomes: the social context confers upon them passive power to obtain material resources. They are not powerless, because they are able to obtain desired outcomes; they do not possess active power, because they are not responsible for the situation that yields those outcomes; they are not merely lucky, because the outcomes are recurrent and predictable; and they possess passive power because the beneficial outcomes are systematic. Our hypothetical beneficiaries lack the active power to obtain the favorable outcomes they enjoy but get them regularly anyway.

Intuitively, we might suspect that the amount of power an agent possesses can be measured by the resources he or she enjoys—the greater the resources, the greater the power. This intuition is erroneous. First, identifying what constitutes a resource often depends on a social context that influences the effects the item will produce if used; not even wealth is a resource as such. For example, a wealthy person may be less powerful in a meeting attended by mostly poor people. The wealthy person may be branded as ignorant of the problems endured by the less fortunate, and his or her finances may allow the others to brand the person as an elitist whose views should be ignored. Moreover, a social context often produces the outcome that people with exactly the same resource will have different amounts of power. For example, if I am the only faculty member of a five-person committee at my institution of higher learning and the two management representatives and the two professional representatives invariably vote as conflicting blocs then I, in effect, determine each outcome as the deciding vote. Each of the five committee members has the same resource but one has more power because of the social context in place.

If the other four committee members are disturbed by this over time they might band together and vote as one bloc, thereby extinguishing my power. If so, my resource is unchanged but my power has diminished radically. Where once I was the determining vote and held full power, my vote has now been rendered irrelevant and I have no effective power other than to cast my merely ceremonial opinion. In sum, resources, once identified, are necessary but not sufficient for power and thus power cannot be reduced to or measured by the amount of resources an agent possesses.

The differences between power and influence are subtle. Influence requires at least two entities; it seems awkward to say that a person, Jones, influenced herself. But Jones may have the power to do countless things on her own. Accordingly, influence is more closely related to power-over than it is to power-to. However, Jones can influence someone without exerting power over them. For example, if Jones walks by a tourist on a hot summer day wearing an exquisite outfit she may unwittingly influence the tourist to purchase a similar outfit. Jones's regal manner of wearing the clothing triggered a desire in the tourist but Jones did not exercise any power over the tourist. The tourist altered his or her own behavior and purchased a similar outfit, but not because of any power that Jones possessed over the tourist. In this case, Jones inadvertently affected the actions of a stranger by *la bella figura* Jones embodied while walking. Jones did not even try to rationally persuade the tourist to purchase any clothing. At most, this hypothetical can be viewed as an example of unintended personal persuasion: the tourist merely perceived Jones's clothing and bearing, and that induced the tourist to emulate Jones's choice of clothing. But notice that Jones did not possess a disposition that the tourist should respond in that or any way to Jones's wardrobe.

To exert power over another person, an agent must affect the outcomes or interests of subordinate parties by means of a disposition, a relatively enduring capability. For example, suppose Jones was an employer out for a summer stroll and she passed one of her employees taking an unauthorized break from work. Jones, a stern taskmaster, orders the embarrassed truant to return to the job forthwith. In this case, Jones would have exercised power over her employee. Power, then, implies a capability or disposition to affect outcomes or interests, while influence often does not involve such abilities or dispositions. The exercise of power also often involves a conflict of interests, an element typically lacking in an exercise of influence. Instead, influence often involves inducement, encouragement, or persuasion in the absence of conflicting interests between the parties involved, but even this is not always the case, as evidenced by the hypothetical involving Jones and

the tourist. There, Jones influenced the tourist in the absence of inducement, encouragement, and overt persuasion.

Likewise, certain iconic dead people can exert tremendous influence over future generations even though they are unable to induce, encourage, or persuade actively: the words and lives of statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and George Washington may influence numerous people today and in the future. These famous people influence us without actively inducing, encouraging, or persuading. Furthermore, although their words and lives affect future generations, to conclude that these historical figures exert power over us is misguided. Lacking dispositions and capabilities, the dead can neither possess nor exercise power.

### Social Power

Despite the common tendency to conceptualize power-over as dyadic—as a relationship between a superior party holding and exercising power over a subordinate party—wider social context is often critical. Wider relations constitute social power and often promote and make possible dyadic power. Moreover, in other cases social power can prevent the exercise of dyadic power. The student-teacher relationship is an example of dyadic power that is situated within and arises from a wider social context. The relationship requires, among other things, that the teacher evaluate the performances of students. One means of doing this is through the issuance of grades, which presumably places a particular student's performance in a comparative relationship with the performances of other students. Clearly, this function of grading fails if every student receives the same grade. Also, the issuance of grades is not the only means by which teachers might evaluate the performances of their students.

That teachers grade the performances of students partially constitutes the power that instructors have over their students. Because grades matter, at least to students who have an interest in graduating, going on to higher education, aspiring to certain careers, keeping parents from complaining, and the like, teachers have structural power in their enduring relationship with their students. That is, the nature of the relationship between teachers as evaluators and students as the evaluated implies that instructors have power over their students in that respect. That teachers possess power over students arises from the structure of the educational system, but whether instructors exercise that power effectively is an open question. Where power is successfully exercised, teachers need not intervene or act upon students

at every discrete turn to underscore that power; instead, their recognized possession of it is enough to promote its effects. Teachers are able to induce certain behavior from students—they are able to limit or control certain choices and actions of their students—because of the structure of their ongoing relationship. Furthermore, the structure itself is in place only because of wider social relations and the actions of third parties: the issuance of a grade as such may have little effect upon a student but for the reactions of parents, prospective employers, supervising educators, and admissions directors at higher levels. If grades were only known by teachers and their students they would be experienced much differently by pupils, and the amount of power that teachers possessed over their students would decrease significantly.

Because grades do matter outside the classroom, students will read, say, poems by Emily Dickinson because they recognize their situated interest in doing so, because the material will be covered on their next exam. They will do so even though they have no immediate desire, no long-term preference, and no hypothetical preference to read the poems, and they remain unconvinced that reading the poems will nurture their objective well-being. That students study the poems is the result of the power teachers are able to exercise over them.

Of course, this power itself is constrained. Teachers who grade arbitrarily will feel the effects of their negligence from outraged parents, administrators, and students themselves. Student evaluations of their instructors are now commonly considered when teaching effectiveness is judged by administrators. Students can, in extreme cases, collectively refuse to attend the classes of teachers they perceive as especially unreasonable. Parental complaints about teachers are taken seriously, at least by administrators at institutions of higher learning. To the best of my knowledge, no student or parent has ever complained because they or their offspring received a grade of A in a course.

Also, the wider social context can exert its own pressures. For example, at my institution of higher learning, a faculty member in the department of education once explained to me why more than 75 percent of the grades her colleagues issued were As. The students in education who graduated and sought jobs needed stellar academic records, because their competitors, who also enjoyed soft grading, had such records. If graduating students from our institution were graded more harshly they would not obtain jobs and the word would filter down to high schools. That would impair future enrollments. If enrollments fell, then some faculty jobs would be jeopardized and the institution would suffer. So, unless a student was utterly irresponsible or

hopelessly inept, he or she was awarded an A in virtually every education class. (Of course, the epilogue is that prospective employers soon caught on to the widespread practice and began to discount grade point average as a reliable guide to future success. They started to place greater emphasis on factors such as scores on standardized tests, which most education faculty members disdain. Delicious irony, that.) Accordingly, seemingly dyadic power relations are often structurally complex, situated in a wider context, subject to change, and loci of struggle.

Social power often arises from cultural hegemony, which is especially oppressive when the experiences, perceptions, and visions of a group of superiors become solidified as universal—when dominant groups have disproportionate ability to interpret and set the terms of social life. When these superiors project their cultural expressions as more than they are, as universal prescriptions defining human life as such, then the dominant values are perceived and experienced as appropriate, natural, and even inevitable. Subordinates internalize the dominant values and thicken their collaboration in their own oppression.

However, to conclude that a social structure systematically oppresses a group of subordinates is not automatically to posit a correlated group of superiors that intentionally and consciously exercises power over the subordinates. The effects of social practices and institutions such as education, socialization, bureaucratic management, medical treatment, the production and distribution of consumer goods, and the like need not result from the conscious conniving of a group of superiors who perceive themselves as oppressors with a purpose. While superiors and subordinates perform numerous conscious, intentional acts within an oppressive social structure, they do so in the normal course of everyday living.

In addition, to suggest that society fully coerces individuals to internalize its imperatives and ideals falsifies reality. Society constrains but also enables. Social roles partially constitute individual identities and facilitate human action. Such actions sustain and alter society. Thus, society is both the context and the result of much human activity. Social power, understood as the capability and disposition that agents possess as a result of their ongoing relationships, is embodied in social structure and is required for human agency. As always, the possession and exercise of power is subject to the ongoing negotiations and struggles of the constitutive parties. However, the ubiquity of power in social life does not imply that these negotiations and struggles are always struggles for power, even though they involve the exercise of power. To analyze social power one must examine underlying social relationships.

At this point, the concept of power-over may seem a colossal muddle. Such power may be possessed but not exercised. When exercised, power-over may or may not be exerted intentionally; it may or may not involve a relationship between two people or two groups or a social institution and the masses; it may or may not be triggered by a conflict of interests; it may or may not compel the subordinate party to do what it would not otherwise do; it may or may not be met with resistance; it may or may not elicit the consent or acquiescence of the subordinate party; and it may or may not set back the subordinate party's interests. The list could continue. One might well be tempted to conclude that the concept of power-over is either vacuous or too broad to be useful. Such a conclusion would be hasty.

### Major Uses of Power-Over

The apparent problem arises from trying to conflate several different uses of power-over into one definition. Power-over can be used to oppress others or to transform them in positive directions or to treat them paternalistically. To concoct one definition of power-over that fully embodies all of these uses is misguided. A better approach is to provide a neutral definition of power-over that is compatible with the three major uses but which requires corollary concepts to distinguish the three uses from each other: *A superior party possesses power over a subordinate party when the superior has the capability (the disposition) to affect the outcomes and/or interests of the subordinate by controlling or limiting the alternative choices or actions available to the subordinate.*

This definition recognizes that the superior party may possess power over the subordinate party but not exercise that power; that when power-over is exercised, the subordinate's outcomes and/or interests may be affected negatively or positively; but that in either case exercising power-over involves controlling or restricting, in any of a variety of ways, the choices or actions available to the subordinate. In this fashion, the superior has limited the usual circumstances of agency enjoyed by the subordinate.

The use of "superior party" and "subordinate party" should not mislead us into concluding that power-over is an inherently dyadic notion. The superior party may be an individual or a group (for example, "the ruling class") or a societal institution (for example, the government or an economic system). Likewise, the subordinate party may be an individual or a specific group (for example, "the proletariat") or the body of citizens distinct from the power-holders ("the masses"). Also, the parties need not be superior and subordinate, respectively, in all respects or even in the possession of power

generally. Moreover, under this definition the superior party may truncate the subordinate's available choices or actions either structurally or through distinct interventions. Enduring structural relationships embedded in society nurture power as human agents participate in them. In fact, ongoing social relations and social roles—which involve systemic, continual mutual interactions—are often necessary for the more intense and recurrent exercises of power. Also, dyadic power often arises from the actions of third parties, those who are not themselves agents in the dyad. Ongoing social and structural relations can produce a context that promotes various dyadic power combinations. Structural limitations are typically governmental, economic, or ideological and produce systematic power-over that is sometimes oppressive. Distinct interventions are typically more sporadic and overtly intentional.

An interesting question arises: Must the superior party have the capability to affect the outcomes and/or interests of the subordinate by controlling or limiting the subordinate's available choices or actions *recurrently* in order to possess power over the subordinate? That is, does the concept of power-over imply that the power holder must have the capability of *systematically* exercising his or her or its advantage? Or is it possible to have power-over in only one or in only a few discrete situations?

To possess the capability of systematically and recurrently exerting power over another party is to be able to dominate the other over relatively long stretches of time, and thereby connotes an especially virulent type of power. But I have decided not to include that element in the general definition, because I am convinced that one party can have power over another party even if the first possesses and exercises that power only once. For example, imagine that a hoodlum accosts a pedestrian on the street, brandishes a firearm, and demands that the person surrender his or her wallet or risk being killed. Given the circumstances and the weapon, to say that the hoodlum is exercising power over the pedestrian is reasonable even if the two parties never again meet: the hoodlum has affected adversely the outcome and interests of the pedestrian by limiting that person's available choices and actions by means of a threat. In that vein, a substitute teacher may exert power over his or her students, but perhaps only for the one class and one day he or she supervises and instructs them. Although the social structure in place confers on teachers recurrent power over students, this particular teacher is in a position to exercise that power only once. The same can be said of a famous person of extraordinary charisma who exercises power over a fan in their only meeting. Suppose prior to and after the session, the subordinate was immune to the personal charm of the celebrity; in such a case, to conclude that the star possessed and exercised power over the fan

only once is reasonable. Accordingly, I have not included the capability of systematically and recurrently exerting power over the subordinate party in the general definition of power-over.

As stated earlier, the general definition of power-over must be supplemented by corollary definitions of the three major uses of power-over: oppression, paternalism, and empowerment. As with power-over in general, one could possess any of the three major uses of power-over without actually exercising it. Nevertheless, I will state the three corollary definitions in terms of their exercise to underscore that they are *uses* of power-over.

The first major use of power-over is oppression. *A superior party oppresses a subordinate party when the superior affects wrongfully and adversely the outcomes and/or interests of the subordinate by controlling or limiting the alternative choices or actions available to the subordinate.* This is the most commonly understood use of power-over. Here the superior party controls or limits the available choices or actions of the subordinate party and thereby affects adversely the subordinate's outcomes and/or interests through a host of possible means: force; duress; deception; personal charm; superior economic bargaining power; disseminating ideology that produces false consciousness which impairs the subordinate's ability to identify his or her genuine interests; truncating public debate to include only trivial or uncontroversial issues; through an informational or knowledge advantage; by exploiting psychological and emotional vulnerabilities; by convincing the subordinate that the judgments of the superior embody special authority; and the like. Depending upon the means implemented and the surrounding circumstances, the subordinates may resist the oppression in some cases, especially when they can still identify their genuine interests and the malevolent intentions of their oppressors; in other cases, the subordinates will consent or acquiesce or obey in anticipation, particularly when their wills and judgments have been overborne by false consciousness and structural socialization. Oppression can be dyadic or societal, and it can occur intentionally or through a social system that benefits some classes, not all of whom were agents in establishing the system, while disenfranchising other classes. Oppression can be recurrent and systematic or episodic and discrete. Importantly, oppression is not necessarily static, as possibilities for change are typically available and resistance by subordinates can be subtle. Oppression also admits of degrees in intensity and scope. Intensity pertains to the strength of the power that superiors wield, and scope refers to the number of areas and issues under their control. These vary from the most forceful and overt oppression meted out by totalitarian regimes to the milder but sometimes more effective dissemination of dominant ideologies that

promote false consciousness in the masses, to the relatively milder control exerted by one individual over another in an otherwise intimate relationship. Systematic oppression involves ongoing dyadic or broader social relations in which superiors repeatedly exercise power over subordinates to the detriment of the subordinates. Finally, subordinates are rarely completely disempowered such that their status with respect to superiors is unalterable. Often, the ongoing social relations promoting and sustaining the power relation are subject to reimagination and revision.

Of course, to *exercise* power-over oppressively (or in other ways), the superior party must *possess* power over a subordinate party. Merely affecting the interests or outcomes of another person adversely is not enough to establish that oppression has occurred or that a relationship of power exists. In addition, exercising power over a subordinate party and adversely affecting the subordinate's interests are not enough to establish oppression. For example, a teacher has power over her students in some respects. Her awarding a student a low grade will, all other things being equal, adversely affect that student's interests. But the teacher has not oppressed the student, at least insofar as her evaluation was unbiased and otherwise reasonable. Thus, oppression requires a wrongful or unjustified setback of the subordinate party's interests.

Although superiors can exercise power-over in ways that promote the interests and well-being of subordinates—for example, paternalistically or transformatively—some theorists argue that the notion of “domination” is different.<sup>8</sup> They take domination to be the ability to limit the choices of subordinates by impeding them from living in accord with their own judgments. On this view, domination thwarts or sets back the victim's interests through coercion or confinement, by overbearing a victim's judgment to such an extent that he or she prefers to satisfy the superior instead of self, or by luring the victim into accepting the judgment of the superior as a more reliable guide than the judgment of the victim. I will not follow this usage because I see no contradiction in saying that one person dominated another, in the sense of controlled, governed, and ruled the other, for the purpose of advancing the genuine interests or objective well-being of the subordinate. For example, parents of a child with special needs may well go beyond the occasional exercise of power-over to the exertion of recurrent domination over the child but do so to promote the child's well-being. Accordingly, I do not view “domination” as inherently pejorative. I will use “oppress” or “oppression,” which are inherently pejorative terms, to describe the types of behaviors that some thinkers use “domination” to connote.

The second major use of power-over is paternalism: *A superior party acts paternalistically toward a subordinate party when the superior tries to*