



Some Reflections on Power and Professor Webster

In the discussion case, "The Section Just Took Over," Professor Webster seemed to have lost control of his class for a time during which the students engaged in vociferous and animated argument about the appropriateness of introducing ethical considerations into the analysis of that day's marketing problem. After more than 20 minutes of debate during which Professor Webster seemed to stand by relatively helpless, he declared the ethical questions inappropriate for class discussion and called the students' attention back to what he considered the relevant marketing issues in the case. How could Professor Webster have controlled the situation?

Power, or control in this case, has been conventionally defined as the capacity to achieve intended and foreseen effects on others.¹ Power is not something one has; rather, power is something that one exercises in interaction with others. The critical aspect of power as a *social* phenomenon is that it is achieved or exercised in *interaction with others*. It is a relationship not a thing. Individuals possess a wide variety of resources, including but not limited to wealth, position, expertise, or the means of physical force. These resources, which are unevenly distributed in most social systems, enable the exercise of power. In other words, in an interaction with others, one may draw upon, invoke, or be deferred to because one possesses one or another resource. Power or control, however, is not synonymous with the resource but only with its successful deployment in an exchange with another. Power is distinct from the resources that enable it because sometimes those resources are not sufficient to achieve intended and foreseen effects in a particular interaction. Thus, power is exercised in social interaction rather than possessed individually.

This supplementary note was prepared by Dr. Susan S. Silbey, Professor of Sociology, Wellesley College, for use with the case "The Section Just Took Over: A Student's Reflections," No. 379-007.

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1. Dennis Wrong, 1979, *Power*. The definition is a theoretical elaboration of and response to earlier formulations by Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Robert Dahl. This understanding of power has been criticized for being insufficiently attentive to the way in which situations are structured to encourage, or limit, particular outcomes. In other words, some authors, e.g. Steven Lukes (*Power: A Critical View*), or Michel Foucault (*Power/Knowledge*), have argued that power can be institutionalized so that some outcomes are more likely than others and those outcomes cannot be directly attributed to the capacity or intention of specific individuals. Thus, Professor Webster may usually influence the activities of this class by virtue of his special pedagogical talents but he also draws upon resources provided by his institutionalized position of professor and the students' roles as students. That inequality that influences many of the exchanges is independent of the particular persons and their individual intentions or capacities.

Returning to the analysis of "The Section Just Took Over," I suggest that Professor Webster could hope to control the classroom situation only by continuing to participate in it. Only by continuing to interact with the students, would Professor Webster have the possibility of achieving intended effects. Moreover, if we define power or control as having to determine *all* the outcomes, then neither Webster, nor anyone else for that matter, can exercise control or power. To determine *all* the outcomes in a relationship would mean the total subordination or elimination of the other party. In all *social* situations short of death, however, each party contributes something to the outcome of the interaction, that is what is meant by the terms social and interaction.² The person exercising power seeks a specific response from the other person; that response is the subordinate's contribution to the interaction without which the intention would not be achieved and the attempted exercise of power not succeed. If power must be exercised in an interaction with others, we see that Professor Webster would forgo, were he to withdraw from the classroom exchange, the opportunity to influence the outcomes. Only by engaging in continuing interaction and exchange can Webster, or any teacher for that matter, hope to influence the student's learning, each exchange or interaction providing an opportunity to exercise power or control.³

2. This is the major insight of the sociologist Georg Simmel who wrote extensively on the ways in which both subordinates and superordinates contribute, albeit unequally, to the outcome of an exchange.

3. This language may seem harsh; the terms power and control are used entirely in an analytic fashion, i.e. to identify in social action the capacity to achieve intended and foreseen effects.