

Competition-trapping the Concept of Power

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Abstract

Defining the concept of power in an uncontroversial manner has proven to be difficult. Considering it is a significant concept for all of the social sciences, finding an uncontroversial way of conceptualizing it is necessary. This work proposes that a manner of conceptualizing power can be obtained through trapping the concept inside a competition, which allows us to conceptualize based on the competition. Concepts of power proposed in different fields of social sciences are discussed in the light of competition-trapping, which lead us to the conclusion that the ways power has been defined in the fields relate with important competitions to them, supporting the idea that power seems to be best understood as a competition-dependent concept. This model also allows us to understand the concept without considering any definition used for it as being incorrect.

Keywords: power, superiority, inferiority, integrated view of power

1. Introduction

What is power? Conceptualizing power means understanding what it is, but this question has puzzled social scientists for centuries and the definition for it remains contested, despite its importance. Revising the literature one finds little hope of agreement being reached for the concept, because it is defined in varied amount of ways in different fields and even every field has different definitions for the concept. If we consider one of the ways it has been defined improper, we automatically spark controversy and the situation remains the same, but is it possible that all definitions are correct? If they are, we must explain how all of them can be correct and yet be so diverse.

This work provides a method for explaining where the diversity of the concept comes from and why all the many definitions for the term are correct, called competition-trapping. This method traps the concept of power within a competition, making it a competition-dependent concept, which means that one must first define a competition and then define power while keeping the competition in mind.

It is a method which allows us to exactly pinpoint what power is, understand the concept without reliance on categorization and not disregard any definition proposed for it, therefore simplifying the understanding of the important but elusive concept of power through a simple framework and being capable of overcoming the controversy surrounding its definition. The expected result is an integrated view of power for the social sciences, with the concept of power being able to morph without the understanding of it escaping from us and without becoming controversial.

2. Competition-dependent concept of power

If power is taken to be influence and the competition is “who knows more about computers?” it will sound as if having influence does not make one powerful, if we consider power as domination and the

competition is “who is nicer?” power as domination does not function, just like it also malfunctions if power is taken to be control over resources and the competition is “which weapon is more destructive?”. Because power seems to be best understood as competition-dependent, we cannot fully account for it through considering power as x or y or categorizing it, rather we must define a competition and, based on it, conclude which subject has more or less power, independent of what power means in the competition defined – when the competition is “who is taller?” height is power, when the competition is “which nation has the highest population?” population is power, when the competition is “which person is more wealthy?” wealth is power, when the competition is “who is more intelligent?” intelligence is power, when we think of the competition “who owns more land?” land is power.

How, then, should power be understood, if it is so varied? Power seems to be best understood as what counts as a means of determining a subject’s position in a given competition, or, in other words, what we use to rank the competitors. This approach is widely applicable, because whenever we think of a competition, we use something to rank the competitors as either being superior or inferior in relation to each other – if the competition is “which nation has more soldiers?” soldiers become power, and nations with less soldiers are interpreted as being powerless when compared with nations possessing more. The logic behind this mentality is that most of the times when the concept of power is seen in the social sciences, there are notions of superiority and inferiority, that is, there are subjects with more or less power, there is inequality. These notions, in turn, lead us to the idea of competition, because only through competitions we can establish that a subject is superior or inferior in relation to another.

Power, with this framework in mind, can be anything, just as long as it counts as a means of determining a subject’s position in the competition defined, which allows the concept to morph without becoming controversial and without we losing the understanding of it, being a possible key for surpassing the controversy surrounding its definition. This competition-dependency has made power a difficult concept to understand, with many different – and yet correct, depending of the competition thought – definitions being put forward. The approaches of defining power as x or y and categorizing it seem to have failed, considering it is still a controversial concept after centuries, leaving us with no option but trying different approaches.

The next sections take some of the ways power has been defined in different fields and they use the model presented in reverse – instead of defining a competition to afterwards define power, starting from the definition of power to define the competition – to understand them. The reverse model faces the issue of being incapable of exactly pinpointing the competition, because whenever we consider power a certain thing, there are several competitions that can be defined where that thing is power – if we consider power as capital, competitions like “who has more capital?”, “who obtained more capital in a year?”, “which nation has more capital?” all have capital as a way of comparing the competitors. This makes it impossible to use the reverse model perfectly, but an approximation is possible to give and, if the reader is not content with the competition given, it is just a matter of thinking of another fit competition for the way power was defined.

3. The concepts of power in international relations

Power as influence (Dahl, 1957) and power as material capability (Singer, 1980) are among the ways power has been characterized in international relations. This section will be using the reverse model for these ways of defining power.

Power as influence is one of the most accepted definitions of power in international relations and it appears to be related with a competition such as “which nation exhorts/is capable of exhorting more influence over other nations?” and, therefore, influence over other nations is a means of exhibiting power. The theorizers of power as influence seem to have had a competition along these lines in mind when trying to establish a definition for power, which makes sense, because weak nations

are hardly capable of influencing strong ones. Power as influence is divided by some authors between soft and hard power (Nye, 2004), with soft power being influence through persuasion and attraction and hard power being influence through economic and military means.

Power as material capability seems to be understood as “which nation has more material capabilities?” and material capabilities are taken as a junction of military, demographic and economic capabilities.

Most of the ways power has been defined in international relations can be related with important competitions to establish ranks between nations. Understanding power as what counts as a mean of establishing ranks between subjects makes it simple to understand the various ways that power has been defined in the field and they do not seem to be wrong ways of conceptualizing power, as long as we keep in mind the competitions international relations worry about.

4. The concept of power in political science

In political science, political power, like in international relations, is usually thought to be influence (Dahl, 1957; Heywood, 2000), but differently than international relations, it seems to be about the competition “who influences more people?”, therefore influencing people being considered power. This competition is an interesting one to establish the power of politicians, as, for example, it makes a nation’s president be ranked above a state governor, since the decisions of the first influence more people than the decisions of the latter. It also makes politicians be ranked above everyone else, because, generally, nobody’s decisions affect more people than the ones of politicians. Needing a way of ranking politicians in a nation, of determining political power, the idea of influencing people is an interesting one to accomplish the task.

Different competitions where politicians are ranked above others can be put forward, as a means of defining political power, but through the competition “who influences more people?” we seem to obtain a decent way of ranking politicians as being more or less powerful, based on the amount of people they influence.

5. The concepts of power in economics

Economics has some ideas of power, including market power, bargaining power and purchasing power. In order to understand these ideas, the reverse model is used.

Market power, also known as monopoly power, can be understood as the competition “which firm has more ability to alter the market price of a good or service?” and, therefore, power stands as the ability to alter the market price of a good or service, with firms being ranked based on this ability. As for bargaining power, the competition is situated as “which part is more capable of bargaining?” power being comprehended as the capacity of bargaining. Purchasing power can be related with the competition “who is allowed to purchase more?”, therefore power is treated as allowance to purchase, which is usually interpreted as money.

Economics needs the notion of power because there are several relevant competitions affecting the field and, as they are different competitions, there are a variety of ways of defining the concept.

6. The concepts of power in sociology

Here French and Raven’s (1969) five bases of social power and Steven Lukes’ (2007) two types of power will be analyzed. Revising the literature, the two seemed to be common ways of seeing power in the field.

French and Raven five bases of social power divide power in five categories: positional power (power because of the rank in an organization), referent power (power to attract others and build their loyalty), expert power (power due to skills), reward power (power to confer material rewards) and

coercive power (power to demote or withhold other rewards). The first category can be related with the competition “who has the highest rank in the organization?”, while the second can be related with “who is more capable of building others loyalty?”, the third with “who is more skilled?”, the fourth with “who is more capable of conferring material rewards?” and the last one with “who is more capable of coercing?”. All the five categories of power are interesting ones to rank people as having more or less power, but considering that these competitions are the only ones which matter in social life does not seem to be correct.

Steven Lukes distinguishes two types of power: the capacity to impact the surrounding world and the capacity to dominate other beings. The idea of power as the capacity to impact the surrounding world connects with the competition “who is more capable of impacting the surrounding world?” and the more one is capable, the more powerful one is. As for the capacity to dominate other beings, the competition “who is more capable of dominating others?” fits, but it is a weird way of thinking about power in the society we live today – power is hardly associated with domination and laws are usually being trespassed when domination is present.

Power in sociology is of great significance, because the main concern of the field and its subfields tends to be inequality, and we use power as a means of defining the inequality, of ranking the subjects.

7. Notions of superiority and inferiority

As of now the way power was defined in different fields was brought forward. This section provides some exemplifications of the varied nature of power through notions of superiority and inferiority and comments them.

When we observe ideas like “one of the most respected persons”, “one of the greatest thinkers”, “a bad player”, “a leading writer” we manage to observe that all of them have one thing in common – they lead us to ideas of superiority and inferiority. If a person is one of the most respected, it means that there are people who are less respected than said person; if there is a great thinker, it means that there are lesser thinkers; if there is a bad player, there are good ones; if there is a leading writer, there are worse writers. If universal equality existed, these ideas of superiority and inferiority would be nonsensical, as we would only refer to the subjects as a person, a thinker, a player and a writer. With ideas of inequality, comes the idea of power, that is, what we use to rank the competitors as being superior or inferior. In the situation of the most respected, power is respect and having more respect than others means being powerful in relation to them, in the second scenario thinking ability is power and the better thinker one is, the more powerful, in the third playing skills is power and playing worse than others makes one be considered bad, therefore powerless, and in the last scenario writing ability is power and writing better than others makes one be considered powerful.

Paying attention to the frequency that notions of inequality appear in human affairs is an interesting task, as one manages to notice they are very frequent. Power is such a central concept for the social sciences because much of it is about notions of inequality, leading one to think about superiority and inferiority, therefore the concept of power appears, as a means of determining what is used to define the inequality. It is important to keep in mind that some definitions of power do not allow exact quantification, such as influence, while others do, such as wealth, but, regardless of this, many definitions where power is unquantifiable are used, because it is not necessary to have exact values and yet differentiating subjects is needed.

8. Many definitions and the utility of the concept of power

Determining a subject’s position in a given competition, that is, the power of the subject in relation to others, is useful in many situations. A huge amount of competitions means the concept of power should

be defined in a vast amount of ways. There are plenty ways of showing one's powerfulness, requiring a broad mentality about the concept.

The plurality of the concept has been considered a problem, but as long as we understand why it can take so many forms and still be correct there is no reason why it should not be taken naturally. Power seems to be a concept which is only healthily understood once taken to be capable of morphing according to the competition thought. This means that no list is required – all what is necessary is defining a competition to define power, which facilitates studying power instead of complicating it: one does not need to be confused by the many ways it is defined, just understand that depending of the competition considered important, it will be defined in a way or another, according to what is used to rank subjects.

It is of fundamental importance to note that unless we make use of competitions, the notion of power becomes inert, because it loses its utility: the concept is mostly used when establishing comparison and perceiving inequality is necessary and if it does not serve for it, it does not seem to have other significant use for the social sciences, other than perhaps as a synonym of capacity. The use of establishing comparison and perceiving inequality, however, is incredibly significant for the social sciences, because much – if not most – of it is about the study of inequality, boiling down to what is used to define the inequality, which, finally, is confined in the concept of power, as subjects having more or less of it is what causes the inequality.

9. The problems of power independency and the advantages of power dependency

If power is unrelated with competitions, it becomes a vastly ambiguous notion that can be interpreted in many ways. Considering power as influence, for example, there are many ways that influence can be understood, in different contexts, as shown by the fact that power is defined as being it in different fields. Turning it into a dependent concept and bringing a competition together when talking about it greatly diminishes the ambiguity. With a competition, we make it clear what we mean by power, without being afraid of misinterpretations.

Power independency means that the kind of competition the person is thinking about ends up related with the way power is defined and, as such, it becomes impossible for consensus to be reached. If I have the notion of being more powerful than my colleague because I have more wealth, why is power defined as influence instead of being defined as wealth and the one with the highest wealth being considered more powerful than the others? But if it is a person thinking about political science, power being defined as influence makes sense, because politicians are ranked according to the amount of people they influence.

Understanding power as what counts as a means of defining a subject's position in a given competition allows us to understand the concept without relying on categorization and not disregard any definition for the concept, because, as long as it counts as a means of defining a subject's position in a competition defined, the way it was defined is correct. Power is incorrectly defined solely when it is not aligned with the competition: for example, if the competition is "who owns more CDs?" and power is taken to be influence, the definition of power is incorrect, because influence does not serve as a means of considering subjects as having more or less power in that competition – what is used to rank subjects is CDs and subjects who possess more CDs are considered more powerful than subjects who possess less.

10. Conclusion

This work built a model where the concept of power in the social sciences is competition-dependent and, therefore, can be considered anything, as long as it is what counts as a means of determining a subject's position in the competition defined. As such, instead of attempting to have a global and uncontroversial definition of power, this approach showed that the attempts of defining power in a

global way are unlikely to work, because power appears to be best understood as a competition-dependent concept.

A reverse model was used, starting from the way power was defined in order to pinpoint the competition. With it, an attempt of understanding the many definitions for the concept in different fields of knowledge took place. The conclusion is that the several ways power has been defined can be related with important competitions for the fields, which are used as a means of ranking subjects. Whenever we read a “power is x”, we relate the x with a competition, leading us to an understanding of why power was defined the way it was. This plurality of definitions appears to be unavoidable, because with each competition a way of defining the rank of subjects appears.

A definition which allows us to understand exactly what power is and yet permit it to morph might be the only possible key for breaking controversy, although perhaps even this way of explaining power can be taken as a controversial one, though it would require showing where it fails to work, considering it accepts any definition for the concept, as long as it counts as a means of determining a subject’s position in a given competition. An integrated and simplified way of understanding power is helpful for all of the social sciences, allowing us to understand why the idea of power has been ever present in them and, perhaps, opening new horizons to be dealt with. Whenever inequality is seen, the notion of power also appears, along with ideas of superiority and inferiority, and as there are vast kinds of inequality, there are vast amounts of ways of defining power. Plenty of the work done in social sciences relates with the study of inequality, some advocating, others fighting it, which makes the concept of power be very important in the fields, because we use power to rank subjects, to define the inequality. It is unlikely inequality will stop being the main concern of social sciences, which means power is likely to keep being a central concept, so having a functional comprehension of the concept is necessary. Controversies in the social sciences are difficult to overcome, but hopefully a model which explains the concept and still permits it to morph into anything can be a functional road for overcoming controversy when it comes to the important concept of power.

11. Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother, Igenes Cerbaro.

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