



The Power Paradox, by Dacher Keltner

Life is made up of patterns. And one pattern kept appearing in scientific studies I've conducted over the past twenty years. It's called the power paradox:Â we rise in power and make a difference in the world due to what is best about human nature, but we fall from power due to what is worst. We gain a capacity to make a difference in the world by enhancing the lives of others, but the very experience of having power and privilege leads us to behave, in our worst moments, like impulsive, out-of-control sociopaths.

How we handle the power paradox guides our personal and work lives and determines, ultimately, how happy we and the people we care about will be.

Twenty years ago, when I began the studies that uncovered the power paradox, I confronted the question: what is power? To outsmart the power paradox, we need to know what power is. The first surprise that my scientific inquiry produced was this: our culture's understanding of power has been deeply and enduringly shaped by one person -- Niccolo Machiavelli -- and his powerful sixteenth century book, *The Prince*. In that book the Florentine author argued that power is, in its essence, about force, fraud, ruthlessness and strategic violence. Following Machiavelli, the widespread tendency has been to think of power as involving extraordinary acts of coercive force. Power was what the great dictators wielded; power was embodied in generals making decisive moves on the battlefields, businessmen initiating hostile takeovers, coworkers sacrificing colleagues to advance their own careers, and bullies in the middle-school playground tormenting smaller kids.

But this view of power fails upon careful scrutiny today. It cannot make sense of the many important changes in human history: the abolition of slavery, the toppling of dictators, the ending of apartheid, and the rise of civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights movements, to name just a few. Society has changed dramatically since Machiavelli's Renaissance Florence in ways that require us to move beyond outdated notions of power. We will be more poised to outsmart the power paradox if we broaden our thinking and define power as the capacity to make a difference in the world, in particular by stirring others in our social networks.

This new definition of power reveals that it is not something limited to rare individuals in dramatic moments of their highly visible lives -- to malevolent dictators, high-profile politicians, or the jet-setting rich and famous; nor does it exist solely in boardrooms,

on battlefields, or on the U.S. Senate floor. Instead, power defines the waking life of every human being. It is found not only in extraordinary acts but also in quotidian acts, indeed in every interaction and every relationship, be it an attempt to get a two-year-old to eat green vegetables or to inspire a stubborn colleague to do her best work. It lies in providing an opportunity to someone, or asking a friend the right question to stir creative thought, or calming a colleague's rattled nerves, or directing resources to a young person trying to make it in society.

Power dynamics, patterns of mutual influence, define the ongoing interactions between fetus and mother, infant and parent, between romantic partners, childhood friends, teens, people at work, and groups in conflict. Power is the medium through which we relate to one another. Power is about making a difference in the world by influencing others. And such power is given to us by others, rather than grabbed.

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