



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 9  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 12

September 1982

# Social-Emotional Keys to the Division of Power

Philip Lichtenberg  
*Bryn Mawr College*

Carol Roman Reimert  
*Bryn Mawr College*

Susan S. Levine  
*Bryn Mawr College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Lichtenberg, Philip; Reimert, Carol Roman; and Levine, Susan S. (1982) "Social-Emotional Keys to the Division of Power," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol9/iss3/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL KEYS TO THE DIVISION OF POWER

Philip Lichtenberg, Ph.D.  
Bryn Mawr College

Carol Roman Reimert, M.S.S.  
Bryn Mawr College

Susan S. Levine, M.S.S.  
Bryn Mawr College

ABSTRACT

Social organizers concerned with facilitating the reallocation of power must not overlook psychological issues. Within groups, power hierarchies are a function of individual methods of coping with social-emotional interactions. Clinical insights suggest that both empowered and disempowered people participate in the process of establishing and maintaining this hierarchial structure.

In her book, Powers of the Weak, Elizabeth Janeway (1980) points out that power is a process of human interaction: it is a distribution of influence within transactions between people that is created or supported by those persons as they have dealings with one another. She takes care to show that persons who can be characterized as the weak, the governed, the ruled, while in some sense powerless, are also contributors to the power arrangements that regulate their lives, and, insofar as they are contributors, they exercise power. She argues perceptively that power is not an attribute of the powerful, a possession they carry, a personal characteristic completely independent of the social interactions in which they engage; and she points to "the sense of relationship and community which can license the use of power and which operates to control its use." Power, she demonstrates, "takes place between interacting members of a relationship."

Much of her book is devoted to an articulation of the actual and potential powerfulness of the weak and the actual and potential powerlessness of those named to the stronger power positions, the persons designated as rulers, governors, powerful and so forth. Her aim, with which we associate ourselves, is to help the weak (for example, women) realize their potential power by recognizing, as did Richard Emerson (1962), that "power resides implicitly in the other's dependency" and that "balancing operations" always are alive in "power-dependence relations." The overcoming of irrational, "tyrannical" and "submissive" forms of power divisions, to use Kaiser's terms (Fierman, 1965), is a major task, all the more important as modern societies revert over and over again to authoritarianism in major social institutions.

In our efforts to learn why people who are oppressed resist social change, why the weak, who should be angry with the people and systems that frustrate them, are not angry or not appropriately angry, we have turned to the literature on "identification with the aggressor" (Fenichel, 1945; Ferenczi, 1955; Freud, 1937). In studying this literature and in figuring out the step by step process through which people

move to become like that which dominates them or like what they are presumed to be by those who oppose them, we have seen that there are discernable patterns of mutual empowerment and disempowerment that take place in transactions with distinct social-emotional characteristics. In their methods for handling certain social-emotional complexes that come to prominence in interactions (such as anxiety, anger or guilt and self-hatred) some participants are empowered and some are disempowered.

If anxiety is the strongest social-emotional factor in a given relationship, for instance, as when uncertainty about their common efforts spreads among the members of a group, the differing ways these members grapple with their anxiety may lead to the empowerment of some and the disempowerment of others. It is functional for the group to elevate to leadership in that anxious period those persons who can "own" their anxiety, contain it and use it to mobilize themselves and others, as in alert apprehension which enables effective action. It is disruptive to lean upon those who are paralyzed by anxiety or who must repress it when others are ready to experience the affect. Thus does power distribution take place, not always rationally and not only in connection with social-emotional perplexities, but importantly influenced by the social-emotional complexes that must be solved in the group context. We believe we are studying an important and frequently neglected aspect of power, a necessary supplement to a consideration of structural/material aspects of power, but not a replacement of them.

The empowerment of some persons in the relationship entails their own efforts toward that empowerment. On the one hand, these efforts may simply be effective work with respect to the tasks and aims of the group such that goals are achieved and the influence of the empowered person is recognized. Persons who manage well their anxiety help the group move through periods of uncertainty and to goal attainment. Persons may suppress their anxiety primarily to be superior to others who are anxious and may gather power from that maneuver.

Yet empowerment does not rest solely upon the endeavors of those who are empowered; it is also a function of those persons in the group who became disempowered. As Janeway argues, power is relational and unfolds in interactions. Whether by a task-centeredness that accepts the empowering person's influence, by acquiescence in the empowering person's intimidating self-aggrandizement or by an active avoidance of responsibility and influence, the disempowering individuals contribute to the empowerment of others in the relationship. For example, again from Janeway (1980), "In the power-dependence relationship, what the weak bring to the bargain is the validation of the power of the powerful: its legitimacy." And that is merely one form of the contribution of the disempowered to the empowering person.

By the same logic, the disempowerment of some is both self-administered and induced. It may be adopted for self-serving purposes such as avoidance of responsibility and risk, and thus be actively sought by persons becoming disempowered.<sup>1</sup> Or

---

1. We are not herein "blaming the victim." Rather, we are simply allocating some responsibility in respect to their powerlessness to the weak. Again, our purpose is to point out that the weak, through claiming their own unrecognized potential, may become increasingly empowered.

it may be imposed upon those disempowered by those persons acting to become empowered. It may even be induced by demands from other members of the group who are disempowering themselves. Disempowerment, like empowerment, is a mutual and transactional process.

A series of principles can be listed from the viewpoint described herein. First, the handling of social-emotional complexes in a group is a factor in power allocations. Second, both empowerment and disempowerment are created and maintained jointly, with contributions coming from others and with self-responsibility as well. Sometimes it appears that the empowered persons have all self-responsibility and no dependence, just as it appears that the weak are all dependent and without responsibility, but that must be taken as what it is: appearance, persona meant to hide the other (frightening) half of the equation. Third, those empowered do not fully "own" the allocated power, even though it is easy to believe that they do. It is jointly maintained; it is not "an attribute of the powerful."

Like anxiety, anger is a basic social-emotional complex that is implicated in the allocations of power, one that inevitably comes to the forefront at certain stages of social struggle. From the civil rights movement, we can remember Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. and we can recognize the importance of the mobilization and management of anger in actions directed toward fundamental social change. Underlying their political effectiveness, which was manifested in exceedingly different forms, the one preaching violence and the other non-violence, was their ability to attract the anger of oppressors as well as oppressed and to bring into transactions between them that mutually felt rage such that the social-emotional complex of anger prevailed. Not only was the self-destructive anger of Black people raised and redirected in the civil rights successes; also brought into prominence was the rage and fury of the dominant forces in society. The management and shaping of those differing forms of anger when oppressed and oppressors confronted each other represented the genius of these leaders.

Indeed, anger raised to social engagement has been important to the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era and the glorious organizing days of the labor movement in the late 19th century and in the 1930's: anger aroused, anger newly well-managed, anger made to serve a reallocation of power in relationships.

The clinical materials on identification with the aggressor are helpful too in showing how the dealing with anger serves as an empowering and disempowering process. Inadequate handling of anger leads to identification with the aggressor on the part of the weak. And such things as recognizing the anger, validating its appropriateness, and forgiving one's own animosities are part of the process of recovery from the pathology that is identification with the aggressor (Eckhardt, 1968). It is not simply anger unfulfilled that leads on to identification with the aggressor, however; it is . . . "helpless rage" (Berger, 1977).

Helpless rage, which is comprised of full-blown rage, and a devastating sense of helplessness, is relatively infrequent. Flashes of anger that course through one's being may remind one of the ineffective temper tantrums of childhood; momentary resentments and unrealized irritations may also be signs of the prototypic helpless rage,

hints of a mode of experiencing that is painful and unwelcome. These signals of helpless rage are common and are sufficient to cause empowering and disempowering activities to appear.

What is disempowering about helpless rage or its signals? Probably the sense that one's anger, which at bottom is a mobilization of one's strengths is inadequate for the realization of one's purposes in the given interactions. It is the anger turned into rage while purposeful intention is turned into helplessness that is a basic recipe for giving in or justifying self-disempowerment.

There are various ways in which the anger of self-assertion and self-affirmation may be transformed into helpless rage. Identification with the aggressor was studied first in connection with child abuse (Ferenczi, 1955), the situation in which the child is physically weaker than the abusing adult and usually emotionally dependent as well so that rage is inevitably going to be helpless. A similar situation holds in concentration camps or prisons or other social institutions where authorities are endowed with great power and open discretion to wield the power arbitrarily. Yet it is not only in extreme circumstances that anger is turned into helpless rage. In ordinary dealings persons may be led to believe by others in their group that being openly angry is inappropriate, is merely personal pique, or that decorum dictates that their feelings are to be suppressed, even if they are true and relevant feelings. Persons may be shamed into the helpless state ("you are having a problem with authority." "You are behaving emotionally, just like a woman, not rationally like me.") or brought into conflict with themselves so that they become confused about their primary purposes and retreat rather than pursue matters. In brief, there are many patterns in transactions dominated by the social-emotion of anger that disempower by creating a sense of helpless rage, from brute intimidation to hints of probable trouble. Disempowerment represents an attempted resolution of the unpleasant social-emotional complex that permeates the relationship.

If helpless rage is central to disempowerment, then controlled rage is the dialectical counterpart that fosters empowerment. As there are many alternative expressions of helpless rage, so there are numerous forms by means of which control is exerted over one's own or others' anger and empowerment is achieved. One person may communicate that the anger being felt is profound but his or her self-discipline and self-restraint are equal to it. Others in the presence of this person may be wary of loosening the self-restraint of that person, for fear that they may flood the atmosphere and themselves in particular with the violence of that anger. They are intimidated by the person carrying anger with self-control, and participate in empowering such a person by their wariness and their own consequent self-limitation. Another individual may accrue power by connecting felt anger with the tasks of the group or the rules of the system in which the relationship unfolds. By mixing together personal distemper and the authority of the group, and thereby causing others in the relationship to be unsure whether the power mechanisms of the collective are in the service of the confounding individual, the person acquires power.

Still a third version of controlled rage that is associated with self-aggrandizing empowerment comes from a particular character style. Some persons find it hard to experience their own anger directly. Because they cannot allow themselves

to be flooded by feelings, they develop unconscious methods for producing those feelings in other people around them. Thus, at the first signs that anger-feelings are imminent, they make someone around them angry while they remain unfeeling. They "experience" their anger, as a matter of fact, but only as a perception of external events as the anger of others in their presence, not as perception of an internal emotional process. Since they do not show emotionality, they often rise to positions of authority, and yet they are buffeted by emotions which are controlled--and they not only control themselves, but others as well on the path of empowerment.

As with anxiety, so with anger, the management of a dominant social-emotional complex may be a central ingredient in the empowering-disempowering processes of group life. We can add to these two social-emotional complexes that of guilt/self-hatred. The abused children described by Ferenczi (1955) show clearly the disempowering side of guilt/self-hatred:

"It is difficult to imagine the behavior and emotions of children after such violence. One would expect the first impulse to be that of reaction, hatred, disgust and energetic refusal. . . . These children feel physically and morally helpless, their personalities are not sufficiently consolidated in order to be able to protest, even if only in thought, for the overpowering force and authority of the adult makes them dumb and can rob them of their senses. The same anxiety, however, if it reaches a certain maximum, compels them to subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor, to divine each of his desires and to gratify these; completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor. . . . The most important change, produced, in the mind of the child by the anxiety-fear-ridden identification with the adult partner, is the introjection of the guilt feelings of the adult which makes hitherto harmless play appear as a punishable offense."

Another way of stating this is that identification with the aggressor is a means of resolving conflict between the impulses of the self and the criticism by the outside world which this impulse generates and which is manifested in hostility between the participants. The disempowering person tries to resolve the struggle by internalizing the angry criticism of the empowering, stronger other. A social conflict becomes an intrapsychic one: the disempowering person disapproves of his or her impulses, becomes internally an aggressor against them, which is an institutionalization of guilt and of hatred of one's impulses; but the same disempowering person also hates the internal, controlling, suppressing force which is a proxy for the angry, empowering other person. So self-hatred is a double-edged factor. There is hatred of self as possessor of desires that are socially problematic; and there is hatred of one's self-denying representative of the social pressure (Freud, 1961). Again from Ferenczi (1955): "Thus we arrive at the assumption of a mind which consists only of the id and super-ego. . . ." And we might add that the id hates the super-ego and vice versa, or the person hates internally both in the service of the id and in the service of the super-ego. This self-hatred fuels the disempowering process.

Yet guilt/self-hatred do not belong solely to the weak in their internalization of the social-emotional complex of anger. The empowering persons push their empowering process through control of their anger, but they come to merge and confound the

demands of the group or the system with their own needs in the process of managing that anger. Thus, whereas the weak install the anger first in superego territory, the strong try to divest themselves of their own particular needs by merging with collective functions. When the powerless feel guilt, it is about violating standards set by authority and convention; when the powerful feel guilt, it is more an ontological guilt, a sacrifice of their own, unique, individual impulses and need patterns. By molding anger (and in controlling other participants), they violate their autonomous desires, their id. The trade-off is Faust's, for worldly power the soul is given over. Self-hatred is also double-edged for the powerful and it is fuel for the incessant need for additional affirmation that continues the empowering process.

The weak and the powerful recognize each other and collude because they are managing the same social-emotions, the social-emotions that characterize transactions between them. They become all the more fused as the power differences between them increase, as the disempowering and empowering aspects of interaction become more prominent and the achievements of the group fade into secondary importance. That is, when the relationship of the powerful and the weak becomes more significant than the purposes that determine their being together, the powerful and the weak become fused with each other and cannot proceed without the support to the patterns each has adopted that the others render.

This understanding of the place of social-emotional complexes in the empowering-disempowering process carries implications for those of us active in social struggle. Although most political and community organizers are aware that the mobilization of anger among the oppressed, and the redirection of that anger once it is aroused, represent vital factors in the organizing activity, few have gone far in their thinking beyond this simple awareness. We know of no theory concerned with organizing for collective action that takes into account the subtle empowering-disempowering developments that we have been describing. Failure to integrate these insights limits the effectiveness and long-term possibilities for social struggle. Indeed, much resistance to collective struggle may stem from first becoming socially active and then having had bad experiences that resulted from unsophisticated treatment of social-emotional complexes that arose in the struggles undertaken.

For example, there is need to consider the fact that the many people who are oppressed have real grounds for being angry, but they are also predisposed by experience to know their anger as helpless rage. Too often, when their anger has surfaced, it has led to a new sense of powerlessness and defeat, and thus to new motives for avoiding feeling actively angry. It is incumbent upon any socially activist group to prevent anger that is aroused from running this course. That is, the revival of anger and its renewed dissipation in helpless rage is a further contribution to disempowerment and discouragement. A first lesson, then, is that the anger of the oppressed is not to be toyed with.

A second lesson comes from the realization that for a reallocation of power by means of the social-emotional complex of anger, the rage of the weak and also that of the powerful must be brought into play in transactions between them. The true recovery for their capacities for anger depends upon the revival in all participants of the social-emotional complex. The transforming element, beneficial to the powerful

as well as to the weak, amounts to the establishment of new ways to manage anger in the group, ways that empower appropriately and equitably all participants in the transactions.

A key insight here is that the reallocation of power in transactions between the ruled and the rulers is both a disempowerment and an empowerment of the rulers; it is not simply a taking from the powerful and giving to the weak. The power of the rulers is a mixture of presumed personal superiority on the one hand, and capacity and position to implement group goals, on the other. The controlled rage of the powerful has the paradoxical effect of empowering the individual in the group while divesting that same individual of possibilities for self-realization derived from needs not authorized by the system. That is, control of one's own anger is costly as well as empowering to the person. Among other things, this very self-control leads to the delusion of personal superiority (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956) and all the personally negative things this means. When transactions between the weak and the powerful lead to reallocations of power, the ability of the powerful to help realize group goals is kept intact and so true power is realized. At the same time, the individual is relieved of excessive self-control, loses the drive for personal superiority, and can be himself or herself more fully and with greater personal satisfaction.

A third lesson from this analysis of the social-emotional keys to the division of power is that anger is not easily mobilized, whether we refer to the anger of the oppressed, the anger of the oppressors, or to the more difficult situation of the anger of the oppressed and oppressors engaged in transactions. It is hard to bring out anger in other than extreme crises. Why? Because people have expended great energy in containing rage that has threatened to destroy them or others. That anger has been contained by being internalized, by being turned against the self. The psyches of oppressed and oppressors alike are confounded by the guilt and self-hatred that are the expressions of the internalized anger. Consequently, alleviation of guilt and self-hatred is essential to successful political and community organizing. Guilt and self-hatred must be dealt with before anger can be productively and readily released into transactions.

It is common clinical knowledge, for example, that women who are abused feel guilty and worthless and cannot express or maintain their anger towards their abusers until they can forgive themselves and even their abusers. This is the specific clinical instance that informs social action. People must be enabled to "own" their guilt and their self-hatred, to recognize its existence and accept its control in their lives. Only then can they forgive themselves and allow pure anger to flow into the empowering-disempowering transactions.

Too often organizers ignore the guilt and self-hatred and try immediately to organize and direct anger towards an enemy. For the oppressed, it is the evil oppressors who are the enemy; and for the rulers it is the wicked, lazy, inferior ruled. The development of what can be recognized as a paranoid perspective ignores the contributions each makes to the situation of its enemy, but more importantly, perhaps, avoids the guilt and self-hatred that all participants carry. When all persons have this guilt and self-hatred, they appropriately distrust organizers who ignore these, and



they resist entering into collective actions fostered by such organizers. When, for a brief period, the women's movement made all men enemies and all women sisters, it was found that too many women resisted such organizing efforts. Feminist leaders (Yates, 1975) then began to discover the enemy within themselves too, to acknowledge that the relations between women and men are determined by both sides, and they began to attend to the guilt and self-hatred experienced by most women. Their organizing could then proceed on a new level because it could reach the more oppressed women who had internalized their anger and felt much guilt and self-hatred.

A final lesson, one that guides our work as well as flows from it, is that activists must pay considerably more attention to the social-emotional factors in actions meant to transform social relations and social structures. Not only achieved power is relational; so too are the empowering and disempowering processes. There exist important psychological issues in social struggle.

#### REFERENCES

- Ansbacher, Heinz and Rowena Ansbacher. 1956. The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler. New York: Basic Books.
- Berger, David M. 1977. "The Survivor Syndrome: A Problem of Nosology and Treatment." American Journal of Psychotherapy. Volume 31: 238-251.
- Eckhardt, William. 1968. "Psychology of War and Peace." Journal of Human Relations. Volume 16: 239-249.
- Emerson, Richard. 1962. "Power-Dependence Relations." American Sociological Review. Volume 27: 31-41.
- Fenichel, Otto. 1945. The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Ferenczi, Sandor. 1955 (1932). "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child." In: Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psychoanalysis. New York: Basic Books.
- Fierman, Louis B. (Editor). 1965. Effective Psychotherapy: The Contribution of Hellmuth Kaiser. New York: The Free Press.
- Freud, Anna. 1937. The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense. London: Hogarth.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961 (1924). "The Economic Problem of Masochism." The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX, James Strachey (Editor). London: Hogarth.
- Janeway, Elizabeth. 1980. Powers of the Weak. New York: Knopf.
- Yates, Gayle Graham. 1975. What Women Want: The Ideas of the Movement. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.