

THE POWER PARADOX

How We Gain and Lose Influence

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*To my team at the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab.
Without you, I would never have been able to tell this story.*

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Power Is About Making a Difference in the World

When I began my study of power twenty years ago, power was often equated with coercion, might, and dominance. The rise and fall of nations was explained in terms of military innovation, conquest, and overreach and the effects of martial activities upon a country's economic strength. Class relations were described in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed and in terms of how economic domination determines the contents of consciousness. Gender relations were seen through the lens of subjugation.

This view of power as coercion finds its clearest expression in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which is read by hundreds of thousands of students in history courses every year and is taught in schools of government, business, and public policy around the world. Machiavelli wrote during a time of extreme violence.

Murder was about one hundred times more common than it is today. Rape was acceptable. Torture was a public spectacle often accompanied by song and poetry. Abuses of power could largely go unchecked: few people could read, there was no journalism to hold the powerful accountable, there was no organized militia to institutionalize martial force, and there was little notion of universal individual rights.

The Prince offers a philosophy of power suitable to such violent times, treating power in its purest form as "force and fraud." We gain and keep such power by committing coercive and unpredictable acts that are impetuous, fierce, and violent. We hold on to such power by appearing virtuous even though we harbor other intentions. This kind of power quiets (or kills) rivals and critics, inspires allegiances, and mutes the masses. Through coercive force and fraud, we dominate.

But counterexamples to this conception of power readily come to mind. Many of the most significant changes in our history—the adoption of women's suffrage, civil rights legislation, the free speech movement and its influence upon the protests against the Vietnam War, the overthrow of apartheid, the rise of gay rights—were brought about by people who lacked economic, political, and military might; they changed the world without coercive force.

One recent study examined 323 opposition movements from 1900 to 2006, in places ranging from East Timor to countries of the former Soviet bloc. Some of these movements used the tactics of coercive force—bombs, assassinations, beheadings, torture, and civilian killings. Others relied on nonviolent tactics—marches, vigils, petitions, and boycotts. The latter were twice as likely

(53 percent versus 26 percent) to lead to achieving gains in political power, winning broad support from citizens, and contributing to the fall of oppressive regimes.

People resort to coercive force when their power is actually slipping. In our professional lives, people who endorse Machiavellian strategies to social life—lying, manipulating, and stepping on others to rise in the ranks—actually report experiencing less power and influence than the average person. In our personal lives, romantic partners are more likely to treat their beloved in coercive ways—through bullying, physical abuse, and emotional threats—when they are feeling *less* powerful. Parents are vulnerable to abusing their children when they feel relatively *powerless* vis-à-vis a willful child. In schools, bullies are continually engaging in domineering and deceptive actions, but they typically rank near the bottom of their class in status, respect, and influence in their peers' eyes. Today coercive force is a more likely path to powerlessness than to gains in power.

The Machiavellian lens blinds us to the pervasiveness of power in our daily lives. When we equate power to the ruthless violence of notorious dictators—Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Pol Pot—we will fail to appreciate how power shapes our own interactions with our friends, parents, romantic partners, children, and work colleagues. When we think of power in terms of extraordinary acts of domination—tanks rolling through villages, guards treating naked prisoners like dogs at Abu Ghraib—we will fail to understand how power shapes more ordinary acts of creativity, reasoning, ethical judgment, affection, and emotion. Conceptualizing power as coercion impedes our attempt to grapple with the

power paradox because it distorts our very understanding of what power is.

In 1938, with Fascism taking hold in Europe, the English philosopher Bertrand Russell observed that "the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense that Energy is the fundamental concept in physics. . . . The laws of social dynamics are laws which can only be stated in terms of power."

Our challenge is to understand how all social dynamics are shaped by power. The past forty years have seen a shift away from coercive force as the basis and expression of power. Forty years ago people believed that leadership required dominance, assertiveness, and force, whether it was in business, law, journalism, politics, sports, or community organizations. But today things are different, reflecting the social changes of the recent past: in North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, people have come to believe that power is best expressed in compassion and enhancing the well-being of others, and that warmth and understanding are just as important to strong leadership as forceful, assertive, and bold behavior.

A first step in meeting Bertrand Russell's challenge, then, is to broaden our thinking about what power is. A new conceptualization of power should apply to all relationships and interactions of every kind, not just to those involving asymmetrical force. It should illuminate the myriad ways we influence one another: by stimulating new ideas, leading protests, lifting up those in need, or redirecting the flow of capital. It should apply to all the contexts in which humans interact and help us understand all forms of social change.

Here is a definition that meets these requirements: power is about making a difference in the world. This definition at its core is pragmatic: power is about changing other people's lives. The definition reflects our highly social nature: we make a difference in the world by influencing other people.

This definition challenges certain misconceptions. Power is not necessarily about attention or fame, for the famous often do little to make a difference in the world, while those who do bring about change typically remain unknown, experiencing little fame. Nor is power necessarily about wealth or social class, as is so often assumed. People's social class—the combination of their wealth, education, and occupational prestige—accounts for only 10 to 15 percent of how powerful and influential they feel at any moment. Money and class translate to power only when people use these resources to make a difference in others' lives.

If we grant that power is about making a difference in the world, then four principles follow:

► *Power Is About Making a Difference in the World*

- PRINCIPLE 1 Power is about altering the states of others.
- PRINCIPLE 2 Power is part of every relationship and interaction.
- PRINCIPLE 3 Power is found in everyday actions.
- PRINCIPLE 4 Power comes from empowering others in social networks.

Let's outline the reasoning underlying these principles. We make a difference in the world by altering others' states (Principle 1). Therefore power is part of every interaction and every relationship (Principle 2). Given these two principles, power is dynamic, in flux, and it is found in everyday acts in our ordinary lives (Principle 3). Accordingly, power is not located within us; it is distributed across social networks and lies in empowering others (Principle 4). Examining the argument and evidence that yields these four principles is the task of this chapter.

POWER IS ABOUT ALTERING THE STATES OF OTHERS

If the social sciences tend to conceptualize power in terms of money, military might, and political participation, it is for good reason: actions within these realms can make a big difference in the world. But if power pervades all social dynamics, then we need to redefine it to illuminate how people make a difference in the world in ways that don't involve money, military action, or politics.

Power, then, is the capacity to alter the state of others. By *state*, I simply mean the condition of another person or other people. States can be about anything—an individual's bank account, a belief, an emotion, physical health, the ability to vote, a feeling of being watched, or a pattern of activation in the brain or response in the immune system.

Defining power in this way better positions us to understand how power has many forms and how we influence others in multifaceted ways. We can influence the economic state of another per-

son by altering her wages, wealth, job security, or retirement savings, or by giving him a gift that lifts him out of privation or by directing capital to her or to the collective that enables her work. We can alter his political state, the access he enjoys to the political process, her likelihood of voting, his sense of political voice, or her feeling of national pride or shame.

We can alter an individual's knowledge about the world. Indeed, profound social change often begins in shifts in understanding the world. In the eighteenth century, three-quarters of the world's people were enslaved, and large portions of European economies were founded upon the slave triangle: shipping goods to Africa, transporting captured slaves to the Caribbean, where those slaves worked the sugarcane fields, then delivering the desired substance to Europeans. What undid this power structure? Knowledge. One day a Cambridge University student, Thomas Clarkson, submitted an essay on the brutalities of the slave trade to a local contest. It won and was passed on to some Quakers, who brought Clarkson into their small network of abolitionists. Energized, Clarkson traveled thousands of miles throughout the United Kingdom interviewing those who had experienced slavery in the Caribbean, reporting his discoveries in essays and pamphlets. His revelations stirred boycotts, aroused the consciences of leaders in the Houses of Lords and Commons, and eventually led to the end of slavery.

We enjoy power in altering the physical states of others. Virginia Apgar was the first female full professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. In 1952, tired of seeing MDs deem premature babies too weak to survive and

allowing them to die, she introduced the Apgar score, a ten-point measure of a neonate's breathing, heart rate, complexion, reflexes, and muscular activity, gathered at one and five minutes after birth. Its spread into medical practice has saved hundreds of thousands of lives and raised our awareness of the costs of premature births, which are one out of nine births in the United States today, and which drain \$26.2 billion a year out of the U.S. economy. We influence others by changing their physical condition.

Power lies in altering the tastes, preferences, and opinions of others. In creating new food preferences and dietary habits, fast-food pioneers have arguably influenced the collective health of nations as powerfully as all but a few advances in medicine. Vidal Sassoon's "ready-to-wear" haircut from the 1960s shifted women's preferences for what their hair could look like and at the same time freed women from hours of fussing with curlers and sprays, making it just a bit easier to get to work outside the home. Lady Gaga has had a revolutionary influence through her music on how teens understand their sexuality and gender, providing them a language and a public forum to express their ever-evolving identities.

Power, understood as a way of altering the states of others, helps make sense of how influential art, music, satire, and the written word can be. These forms of creative expression may not directly alter a person's bank account or prove decisive on the battlefield, but they are powerful because they alter a person's beliefs about what is real, true, and fair. Dear Abby's writings have helped tens of millions of people navigate the moral dilemmas of everyday life—how to talk to a teenage daughter about depression, what to do about a philandering husband, how to get along with a

difficult in-law. Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, *The Onion*, and *Saturday Night Live* offer some of the most powerful representations of today's political events. Cultural figures such as Martha Stewart, Bono, LeBron James, Edward Snowden, Arianna Huffington, and Oprah Winfrey are framing and shifting our political leanings, what we deem to be right and good. At its core, power is about altering the states of other people.

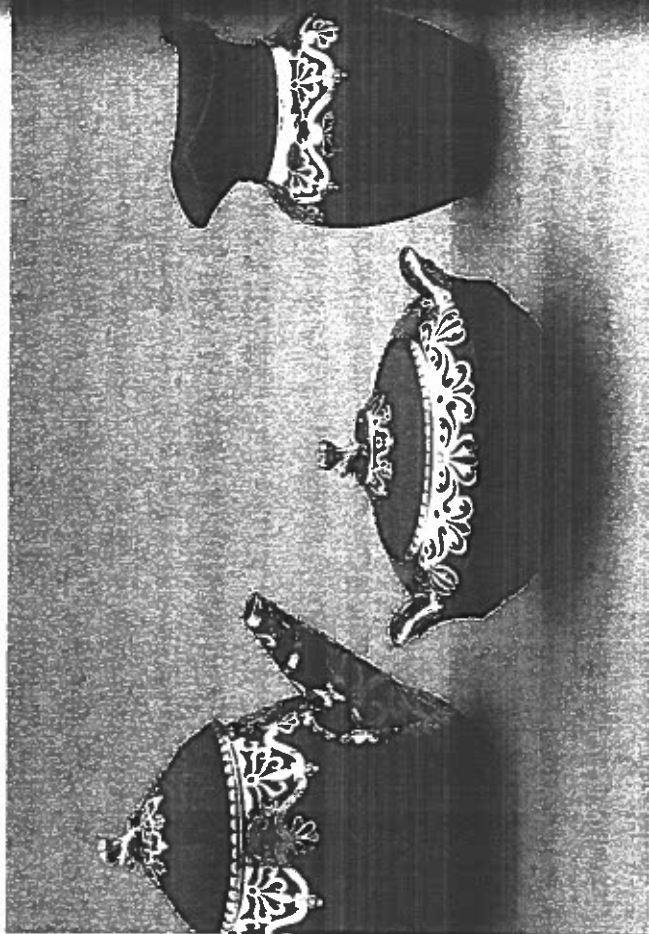
POWER IS PART OF EVERY RELATIONSHIP AND INTERACTION

One hundred and seventy years ago, when members of the typical British family sat down to enjoy a cup of tea, they might have done so with the earthenware Victorian-era tea set of the 1840s (see the photo on the next page). It was mass-produced for the middle class, with lacy silver patterns gracing the teapot, the sugar bowl, and the milk jug. As that British family drank their tea, they were participating in the power politics of the British Empire. To fill that unassuming teapot, the British fought two wars with China, the Opium Wars, and grabbed land in India and Ceylon, where they created cheap pools of labor to harvest the leaves of the national drink. To sweeten that drink with sugar, the British elite ran the slave trade. The lesson here is that power imbues every manufactured object: in how it is invented and produced, in how it alters the states of others, in the resources needed to possess it, and in how it signals a specific rank in society.

In social relationships as well, power imbues every interaction and every relationship. Social psychology—my discipline—long assumed that certain categories of relationships were free of power dynamics—for example, those between young lovers or between parent and child. Certainly momentary experiences within these kinds of relationships—the merging with someone as we fall in love, the euphoric delight of wrestling with a dog pile of giggling four-year-olds—suggest that certain relationships are indeed free of rank, influence, and power.

But more recently, intensive studies from around the world have found that power is part of every relationship. Yes, in certain relationships power is more salient and explicit—chiefdoms of a few thousand years ago, military units, religious hierarchies, caste systems in India and other countries, and organizational charts depicting roles within corporations. But upon closer study, all relationships prove to be defined by mutual influence. A developing fetus and its mother are actually competitively vying for nutrients the mother has produced in the womb, a competition that helps explain certain pregnancy-related illnesses. Even this most non-hierarchical of relations—that between mother and developing child—is characterized by patterns of mutual influence. Defining power as altering others' states means that power permeates all relationships, in the family, among friends, and in economic exchanges.

Recognizing that all social relationships are imbued with power can provide us with insight into our personal lives. For example, viewed through this new lens on power, sibling relations may appear in a different light. I feel as though I share as much



with my brother, Rolf, as with any other human being alive. We see the world through a similar, genetically encoded, historically shaped lens. But I am older, and that power dynamic influenced how we developed into the individuals we are today.

Early in development, older siblings are bigger, more physically coordinated, and more advanced in language, reasoning, and physical independence. They enjoy greater power over their younger siblings. Many conflicts between very young siblings—upward of six to eight a day—are about power. Out of these power dynamics, siblings develop identities in enduring ways. If you are an older sibling, you are more likely to develop into someone who seeks out power (and study it perhaps), who is a bit more oriented to the status quo (because it has historically favored those like you), and who is a bit more conventional. If you are a younger sibling, you learn to be more sophisticated at the practices of kindness and cooperation, to avoid conflict with your dictatorial older siblings. You are more likely to gravitate toward innovative, risky actions that challenge the status quo, which has been biased against you. You are more likely to endorse and lead scientific revolutions. You are more likely to steal bases as professional baseball players. You are more likely to go into a career as a stand-up comedian and mock the powers that be. We can trace our identities back to the power dynamics of our early family life.

The ebbs and flows of our romantic lives take place within the patterns of power dynamics. The love that partners feel toward each other is colored by the balance of power between them. In more egalitarian, mutually empowered couples, partners feel more

love, more trust, and more satisfaction. But in heterosexual relationships where the woman feels disempowered, she is less likely to have orgasms and is more likely to lack sexual interest and lubrication of her vaginal walls in preparation for sex. In heterosexual couples where the man feels disempowered, for example by a job loss or an economic downturn, he is more vulnerable to premature ejaculation or erectile dysfunction. Sexual desire cannot be separated from power, nor can its poetic partner, love.

Theorists have long argued that in friendships we form relations defined by sameness, equality, and reciprocity. And clearly this is true. At the same time, though, friendships occur within social networks that are colored by power dynamics. A study of childhood friendships found that the children with dense networks of friends enjoyed many perks of power—they got more invitations to birthday parties and playdates, and greater respect from their peers. Those children who were not named as often as friends were more likely to suffer the pains of powerlessness—social rejection, shame, humiliation, and the desire to strike out in frustration.

The parent-child relationship is imbued with power in innumerable ways, from how a parent handles a four-year-old's temper tantrums to how a teen follows the parent's decree to not take drugs. The photo on the next page comes from an eight-mile bike ride my family took through the psychedelic canyons of Zion National Park. During the ride, I gave my daughters, Natalie and Sraffina, then ten and eight, a handful of M&Ms after each half mile; good work deserves rewards, after all, the psychologist in me

reasoned. Halfway into the ride, reason got the better of me, and chocolate got the better of them, so I declared that I would dole out no more treats for their efforts. My daughters countered with the emotional display in the photo (taken on the ride). Within milliseconds I was reaching into my pocket to give them more M&Ms.

How people parent emerges out of their stance toward power. Parents who express their authority but empower children with voice and independence produce higher-functioning kids than parents whose styles are anarchic or who are rigidly hierarchical and coercive and who decree from positions of absolute authority what is right and wrong.

Power is not restricted to boardrooms, battlefields, and the U.S. Senate floor. There are plenty of politics on playgrounds, in bedrooms, at dinner tables, at offices, and in bars. Defining power as a capacity to alter the states of others helps clarify how and why it permeates all social interactions, in relationships of every kind.

POWER IS FOUND IN EVERYDAY ACTIONS

Social psychologists have long used "the leaderless group discussion paradigm" to study who rises in power. A group of strangers is brought together and asked to solve a problem collectively, like choosing from among different candidates for a job, dividing a pool of money, or even rank ordering objects, such as a flashlight, mirror, knife, and canteen, in terms of which would be most useful for surviving alone in a desert for a week. Roles are not assigned, and no guidance is provided; the individuals are left to



their own devices to discuss and reach consensus on a decision, all the while being videotaped.

While making the decision, some of the participants gain power—very quickly. Outside observers viewing the videotapes of these interactions will agree within a minute or so about who has power and who does not. People quickly fold into patterns of influence that others can perceive. Power emerges instantaneously when humans interact. The same is true in children's interactions. When ten-to-twelve-year-old boys settle into summer camp life, within a day some campers enjoy more power and are shaping their group dynamics. When children go to kindergarten, shortly after the start of school some five-year-olds are perceived by their peers to have more influence, and others less so. Even among children as young as two, some quickly enjoy more influence at day care, in that they attract attention, guide play, and control valuable resources—the cherished scooter or the favorite tire swing.

Power is always emerging, quickly, as the leaderless group discussion paradigm reveals. People gain power as the result of small, everyday behaviors: by speaking up first, offering a possible answer to a problem, being first to assert an opinion, freeing up everyone's thinking by throwing out a wild suggestion, question, or humorous observation that gets the creative juices flowing.

Our power is found in simple acts that bind people together and yield the greatest benefits for the group. The difference we make in the world depends on the quotidian: on raising the right question, offering encouragement, connecting people who don't know one another, suggesting a new idea. Power is surprisingly

available in daily acts of social life. Critical to avoiding the power paradox is recognizing that enduring power hinges on doing simple things that are good for others.

The fact that power is tied to everyday acts helps explain why it is always in flux. Your capacity to influence is always shifting, depending on your actions. A person's power differs from one context to another: a woman might feel powerful supervising a team at work but relatively powerless at home when negotiating with a defiant teen. Even within the same context, a person's power shifts over time: one day at work the individual is assertive and influential, the next day less so.

Studies of our primate relatives and hunter-gatherers also provide evidence for this third principle, that power is context specific, continually shifting, and dependent upon specific actions tailored to the current situation. Despotism like gorillas and chimpanzees routinely resort to threat and coercion to rule, but their rank—that is, their influence and access to resources—is negotiated nearly every hour of every day between alpha males and females and their rivals. Even in more hierarchical species, rank may be in flux and tied to context. Anthropologists who studied hunter-gatherers in New Guinea, Alaska, the Amazon, and Africa found it difficult, if not impossible, to identify a single leader. Instead, the individuals who had power shifted from one context to another, and it was tied to specific actions relevant to the needs of the group. An individual's capacity for influence—power—is found in ordinary actions tailored to specific contexts that advance the group's interests.

POWER COMES FROM EMPOWERING OTHERS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Charles Darwin changed the world with *On the Origin of Species*, but much of his evidence came from the network he created. He carefully wrote fifteen hundred letters a year, or about four a day, to collaborators who included missionaries in remote parts of the world, a French neurologist working on facial musculature, MDs reporting on when patients blush, fur trappers, gardeners, zookeepers, and pigeon fanciers. Darwin's writings are an expression of many people's ideas from all walks of life.

What appears to be an influential act of an individual typically will prove to be a collaboration of many minds, the action of a social network. Work today is more collaborative than ever, founded upon the networking tendencies Darwin so excelled at more than a century and a half ago. Half the U.S. workforce is working in teams. A study of over 19 million scientific papers from the past fifty years found that the number of authors on those papers has nearly doubled over that time. The same is true of patents. Acts of innovation and influence are collaborative. We have arrived at our fourth principle: power is distributed across social networks and is found in empowering others.

No one got this more right than the philosopher Hannah Arendt. While living in Berlin in the early 1930s, Arendt was active in fighting the rise of Nazism. She was apprehended, interrogated, and released by the SS and shortly thereafter left Germany. An early critic of Stalinism and a champion of equal status for Israelis

and Palestinians, she found lasting renown in an essay for *The New Yorker* in which she argued that Nazi mastermind Adolf Eichmann was not the sadistic psychopath whom all had imagined, prior to his trial in Jerusalem, but just a functionary signing papers within Hitler's bureaucracy. The power of the Nazi state did not reside within evil individuals but was distributed across the networks of that power-mad social system.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt detailed distinctions between slavery, totalitarian states, and the Holocaust and explained how such oppressive hierarchies, founded upon coercive force, strip individuals of their power, their ability to make a difference in the world. Guiding these observations is her conceptualization of power:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power," we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.

Elsewhere Arendt writes that power is the ability to "stir others to collective action." The French philosopher Michel Foucault would agree, proposing that power is "employed and exercised through a net-like organization." Your capacity to influence others depends upon the networks of people you are connected to, which today means your 300 Facebook friends, the 1,200 people you know, your family and circle of six to eight friends (all averages in

the United States), and the extent to which those individuals influence others, who in turn influence others, who in turn influence others, and so on.

Arendt's thesis—that power is found in one's capacity to stir others within social networks—has deep evolutionary roots. We evolved in small groups of a few dozen individuals. We lived in centralized camps, where we cooked, ate, played, fought, reproduced, and slept in close contact and typically collaboratively, moving around as necessary to accommodate others, and taking care of children. Our digestive systems, adapted to protein-dense meat, coevolved with the cooperative hunting of big game, which is rare in the primate world. We fought and defended ourselves collectively against other hominids who had branched off from our evolutionary tree. We built up collaborative networks to take care of our big-brained, hypervulnerable offspring. That is, in evolution we met critical survival- and reproduction-related problems by collaborating in social networks. Our power as a species was social and was found in the actions of social collectives. Today as well, an individual has power to the extent that she stirs those social collectives to take purposeful, effective action.

If our power is found in our social networks, then it follows that it is based in how well we empower others. And we empower others through daily acts of influence: by acknowledging another's good work, by offering an encouraging phrase or making appreciative eye contact, or by giving others responsibilities, resources, and opportunities. That power lies in empowering individuals in social networks is in fact an antidote to the power paradox. Desmond Tutu concurs. When asked how he helped

bring down apartheid in South Africa, he replied: It was the result of small actions of millions of individuals.

Our everyday actions within social networks can be catalysts of influence and social change. If you change your diet to consume less meat, your neighbors are likely to do the same. If you give to charities, your work colleagues laboring nearby are more likely to do so as well. If you vote and talk about it with your friends, they are more likely to vote. Behavior is infectious. When you share something with a stranger, that act of generosity makes the stranger 19 percent more generous in a subsequent interaction with new strangers not involving you. That new stranger, in turn, is 7 percent more generous in yet another interaction with yet other strangers, now twice removed from you. If you do things that boost your happiness, it will not only boost your friend's happiness, it will also lift the spirits of your friend's friend, someone you don't even know. Power is found in empowering others in our social networks.

THE POWER PARADOX BEGINS

In this chapter we have uncovered four principles that illuminate what power is. It is the capacity to alter others' states. It permeates interactions in all social relationships. It is continually emerging and in flux according to everyday actions. It is distributed across social networks and is found in empowering others.

Having power—a capacity for influence—feels good, in a particular way. It does not feel soothing or calm or blissed out.

Rather, it is accompanied by feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration, and hope, and it is supported by surges of dopamine in the brain. This feeling of power leads us to seek power and to enjoy it when we are making a difference in the world. But beware of enjoying the lofty delights of power too much: dopamine and the feelings of power are at the heart of addictions to certain drugs, like cocaine, and bouts of mania, both of which lead to impulsive, unethical action and delusional thought. What feels so good—the capacity to influence and make a difference in the world—can quickly turn to excess. The power paradox is always close by.