

Power and Authority

“Power” is a word we use a lot every day. Often it is used to mean energy, especially when people are talking about machines, but when used in the social sciences, “power” has a very specific definition. When someone is described as powerful or having power in the social sciences, it means they have the ability to influence other people or events so that things happen the way they want them to. If you are powerless, that means you have little control or influence over the things happening around or to you. A baby, for example, is powerless—they cannot walk, talk, or even eat without help—while their caregiver has power—their caregiver decides where the baby goes, when the baby sleeps, eats, etc.

Power can be either legitimate or illegitimate. Legitimate power, which is power that others recognize as proper and right, is called authority, and often comes directly from a certain social or political role. For example, the president of a country has legitimate power recognized by others because people have chosen them as their rightful leader. At school, the teacher is an authority in their classroom because they are in charge of teaching their students, who must listen to and obey them. Some authorities, like the president of the Philippines, are elected by the people they serve. Other authorities, like a teacher, are appointed by a different authority, who everyone agrees has the right to do so.

Most positions of authority come with a set of rules, things that the person has the power to do and things they do not have the power to do. For example, the president of the Philippines has the power to appoint other government officials. However, a lot of the time the President cannot make that decision themselves, and a committee of appointment must approve his decision. Also, the President has no power over how long they can be president, as it is written in the constitution that a president can only have one term of 6 years.

However, not having authority does not mean you cannot have power. Many people have power over things they have no authority in, because as long as people obey them and they can influence events, they have power. For example, in your barkada, is there someone who always makes the plans, who everyone listens to, the “unofficial leader”? That person has no authority over everyone else—they haven’t been appointed the leader by anyone, and it is not their right—but they still have power over the rest of your barkada. There are also people who secretly have power over an authority; for example, in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Lady Macbeth does not have any position of authority and is only the wife of a Lord. However, she manages to convince her husband to kill the King and become King himself, even when he has doubts; she is the kingmaker and strategist behind her husband’s rise to power and authority.

Power and authority, then, are both good and bad things. We need leaders, people who will keep order and make important decisions, who people will listen to; otherwise, there will only be chaos as everyone acts according to their own personal wants and needs and nothing will get done. However, if anyone has too much power—whether given or not—then no one questions them even when they do bad things. That is dangerous, not only because no one should do bad things, but because the more power you have, the more good and bad you can do, because you have the ability to make people and things do what you want them to do. It is therefore especially important that we be critical of those in power and hold them accountable for their actions, because the impacts of their actions are larger than that of an average person.

No human is all-powerful, but no human is entirely without power, either. There is no supreme ruler of the world, and even the President has to obey the constitution. Even a baby, who cannot control their own body, can still influence others to clean, feed, and hold them by crying. Individuals all have different levels of power, but we all hold some amount of power. In a democratic society, for example, all people have the power to elect government officials, and therefore have the power to remove them from office. It is important to know what power you have and how to use it well.

Authors: Nuria Benitez and Samantha Merida