

# SOCIAL POWER IN SUPERVISION

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A person has social power in the eyes of another when they are seen as having the ability to influence them. From French and Raven's (1959) model, there are five different types of social power that are relevant to supervision.

**Reward and Coercive social power** is being seen to have the ability to reward and punish. This is more than the structural reward/coercive power that is held by a supervisor to make positive/negative reports. A person has high reward/coercive social power when it matters to the other person how they are viewed by them, independently of any formal assessments/reports. When you value someone's view of you, then their positive and negative feedback carry more weight.

**Expert social power** is being seen to have the needed expertise (whether or not they actually have it). In western society, males are often raised to be good at self-presentation so that they earn social power (and they also gain it by gender privilege), while women are often raised to be modest and egalitarian, limiting their skills in earning social power.

**Legitimate social power** is being seen to have the legitimate right to take a position of authority and act in various ways in that position. For example, a supervisor is likely to be seen as having the right to ask practitioner's to show their work, but they don't have the right to ask the practitioner to show their body. On the other hand, leaders of encounter groups are sometimes legitimised to ask participants to remove their clothes as part of the group process.

**Referent social power** is being seen as a reference point or role model. It is based on a shared worldview and values.

Structural power is assigned (by the organisation, university or registration board). On the other hand, social power cannot be allocated by someone else. It is an attribute that one person **earns** in the eyes of another on the basis of:

- Preparation
- Structure
- Confidence
- Relevant qualifications and expertise
- Relevant experience
- Shared values
- Personal style

## **Mutual social power**

A strong supervisory relationship is based on mutual social power. The supervisor needs to be seen by the practitioner as having sufficient reward, coercive, expert, legitimate and referent power to carry out their responsibilities. In particular, they

need referent power. It doesn't matter how expert you see someone; if their values and approach don't fit with yours then you will dismiss their input.

Practitioners also need social power in the eyes of their supervisor. The practitioner is not a blank slate that the supervisor writes on. They have experience and expertise that needs to be recognised. They have a legitimate right to have their own ideas and to be an active participant in supervision, rather than a submissive follower. Most importantly, they need to have their values and worldview recognised and appreciated. If the supervisor doesn't appreciate the practitioner's value position, then they can't provide supportive and congruent supervision.

### **Empowerment**

One of the purposes of supervision is empowerment, that is, gaining personal social power (Hewson, 1999) which means gaining the perception in one's own eyes that one has adequate competence to practice (expert power) in a manner that is congruent with one's values (referent power) and with a reasonable right to carry out the tasks of one's professions (legitimate power).

### **References**

Hewson, D. (1999) Empowerment in supervision. *Feminism & Psychology*, 9, 4, 406-409.