DEFINING POWER IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Power is what Walter Bryce Gallie called an *essentially contested concept.*[1] In brief, we all believe that we know what it is and we could all readily offer up a definition of our own, however, no consensus exists regarding what it actually is at its core or how best to definitively define it. It is also easy to see that different fields, by their very nature, understand power differently; the working definitions of the construct differ across sociology, anthropology, law, military scholarship, political science, and economics. There are also stark differences within fields. Within psychology, social psychologists often understand power differently (for example as social identity), than do personality psychologists (for example as individual agency).[2] Within theology, Augustine placed the human intellect with its insights concerning the nature of goodness at the core of his understanding of power, something that was often ignored in subsequent theological discussions.[3] Even where a degree of disciplinary consensus momentarily materializes, its historical contingency is not far away. For example, one can locate many of our contemporary discussions in the social sciences within larger trends; such as that starting from an understanding of power focused on the ability to realize one's own will in the face of resistance from others (e.g. Weber), through increased attention to its functional nature (e.g. Parsons), to broader notions such as *social capital* (e.g. Bourdieu), and subsequently *legitimation-based* definitions, which includes the silencing of particular issues as part of the processes by which certain issues can be deemed "beyond debate" (e.g. Lukács).

1 W. B. Gallie: Essentially contested concepts. In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956), pp. 167–198.

2 For example, one can compare Henri Tajfel's understanding of the power of the collective within *Social Identity Theory* with Robert W. White's understanding of the development of personal agency.

3 J. Guerrero van der Meijden / K. Wilczyński: Reason and will. Remarks on Augustine's idea of power. In: The Idea of Power, ed. by M. H. Kowalewicz, *Orbis Idearum. History of Ideas NetMag* 2–1 (2015), pp. 33–46. Retrieved from www.orbisidearum.net.

Not only is power differently understood across fields and time, but it is also arguably sensitive to subtle changes in such factors as *sensitizing concepts,* those concepts that provide a general sense of reference and guidance to our study of such constructs as power,[4] even informing work conducted on such heavily subject-driven approaches as *Grounded Theory.*[5] Similarly, the weight we give to particular *Weltbilder* influences how we define and engage with the object of study.[6] Power looks radically different if we examine it through the lens of gender or age,[7] and whether in our exploration of it we value or reject such notions as fantasy[8] or trust.[9] Our study of power also looks very different if we understand it to be something inherently bad or inherently good, or as something that can be studied in abstraction from such value judgments, as is generally assumed within scientific research. Larger shifts in our general Weltanschauung also influence our understanding of such basic concepts as power, as exemplified in the changes seen in the wake of the tidal waves caused in our thinking by the division of mind and body generally attributed to Descartes. This split has been linked to the foundations of the scientific revolution in general and to the scientification of psychology more specifically.[10] It has also been linked to the removal of Aristotelian constructs with their own *telos* from much of Western thought[11] and to our general embrace of nominalism and thus to our present focus on efficient, rather than ultimate, power.[12]

Despite this conceptual cornucopia, the issue of power is generally approached in a manner that speaks to a search for definitional certitude and singularity. We want to know what power *really* is, at its core. This is not surprising. The construct is important and, in our ever-shifting conceptual landscape, there is a lot at stake. In the face of the kinds of shifts mentioned above, as well as those accompanying more mundane changes in situation, circumstance, goals, relations, etc. we remain definitionally flexible, embracing varying definitions, at various times, under var-

4 H. Blumer: What is wrong with social theory? In: *American Sociological Review*, 18 (1954), pp. 3–10.

5 G. A. Bowen: Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. In: *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5 (2006), pp. 12–23.

6 For a discussion of Weltbild and Weltanschuung in psychology, see M. H. Kowalewicz: Weltbilder, Weltanschauung und *Mind*. Freuds *Via Regia versus Ars Interpretandi* oder *Voyage au bout de la nuit.* In: *Heumeneutik und Psychoanalyse. Perspektiven und Kontoversen*, ed. by H. Lang / P. Dybel / G. Pagel Würzburg: Koenigshausen & Neumann [2016: in press], pp. 33–71.

7 O. Oyewumi: *The Invention of Women*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1997.

8 C. Cornejo: From fantasy to imagination: A cultural history and a moral for cultural psychology. In: *The Psychology of Imagination: Social and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by B. Wagoner / I. Bresco / S. H. Awad [in press].

9 C. Cornejo: On trust and distrust in the lifeworld. In: *Dialogical Approaches to Trust in Communication*, ed. by P. Linell & I. Markova, Charlotte, NC : Information Age Publishing 2014, pp. 237–253.

10 e.g. Cornejo [in press].

11 A. MacIntyr: *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1981.

12 C. Taylor: *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007.

ious circumstances, and depending upon our current goals. We remain all the while, however, tempted to claim definitional certitude and singularity. In Wittgenstein's classic example, even if when pushed we are unable to say what something as simple as a game actually is, we have no trouble playing games and we do so with a certainty that "*this* is how the game is played, period." In other words, in playing the game we often adjust our understanding of its rules, and at times, we even change the rules, and yet when it comes to defining such constructs, we speak with a confidence that distracts from these definitional shifts. Such definitional shifts color all concepts, not just those that are essentially contested.[13] Even something as apparently straightforward as a *river* is not always defined as a river across cultures, geographic space and seasons[14] – and yet, like with the notion of *game*, this state of affairs generally does not challenge our convictions regarding our definitional understanding of the construct, *river*. In other words, these observations do not undercut the power of definitions, quite the contrary; they speak to how fundamentally important they are. In summarizing the thinking of Karl Popper, McGee[15] wrote that "the amount of worthwhile knowledge that comes out of any field of enquiry […] tends to be in inverse proportion to the amount of discussion about the meaning of words that goes into it." Such sentiment (like the more explicitly social approach of Kuhn) reject claims to final definitions (as was the project of the Logical Positivists), opting rather for powerful, but temporary, answers to current questions. As Jacob Bronowski eloquently put it, in our failure to settle on final answers to even the most simple of questions, "what we fail to find is not truth but certainty; the nature of truth is exactly the knowledge that we do find."[16]

How has social psychology generally capitalized on the power of definitions, while avoiding the definitional quagmire? At present, there appear to be at least two ready-made options for social psychologists to adopt: (1) to approach the notion of power as if it were an object, by operationalizing it and treating it as an independent variable *OF* study; or (2) to understand power as an analytical lens *FOR* the study of social phenomena. While social psychology would seem to be constitutionally able to follow either path, it has generally tended to follow the first option. We will now briefly explore some of the reasons for the primacy of this option.

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13 G. C. Bowker / S. L. Star: *Sorting Things Out. Classification and Its Consequences*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1999.

14 M. P. Taylor / R. Stokes: When is a river not a river? Consideration of the legal definition of a river for geomorphologists practicing in New South Wales, Australia. In: *Australian Geographer* 36 (2005), pp. 183–200.

15 B. McGee: *Karl Popper*, New York, NY: Viking Press 1973, pp. 50f.

16 J. Bronowski: *The Identity of Man*, Garden City, NY: American Museum Science Books 1964, p. 37.

Power as the object *of study*

In historically breaking from philosophy and attempting to develop a more "scientific" approach, starting in the 19th century psychology increasingly embraced a mechanistic view of psychological phenomena, one that searches for efficient causal connections between quantifiable and measurable variables.[17] Writing in the 1930's, the social psychologist and native of Krakow, Poland, Gustav Ichheiser commented on this state of affairs as follows: "… social scientists should, in my opinion, not aspire to be as 'scientific' and 'exact' as physicists or mathematicians, but should cheerfully accept the fact that what they are doing belongs to the twilight zone between science and literature."[18] Part of the reason Ichheiser's name may not be known to you is in part that his skepticism towards this empirically based approach, as exemplified by this quotation, put him outside what was increasingly becoming the mainstream of social psychology.[19]

The early study of power generally took a *quantitative-capacity* approach, meaning that the more power one was understood to have necessarily implied another having less. Power was generally seen as a zero-sum enterprise, and as the power *over* someone (rather than as the power *to do something*). This approach fit nicely into the increasingly mechanistic philosophy taken by psychology, and would blend into the work of early theorists of power writing in the middle of the 20th century, such as French and Raven, and Thibaut and Kelley.[20] These theorists would largely focus on *fate* and *behavioral control*.[21] In this spirit, researchers would produce various typologies of power that could help explain what version of power might be best plugged into other social psychological formula depending upon the particular object of study (e.g. be it coercion, expertise, or legitimacy).

More recently, within research on the social cognition of power, this approach has developed into the notion of *outcome control*.[22] Speaking to the prevalence of

17 T. H. Leahey: *A History of Psychology: Main Currents in Psychological Thought*, Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Prentice Hall ⁶2004; J. Michell: *Measurement in Psychology. Critical History of a Methodological Concept,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005.

18 Cited in F. Rudmin / R. M. Trimpop / I Kryl / P. Boski: Gustav Ichhieser in the history of social psychology: An early phenomenology of social attribution. In: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 26 (1987), pp. 165–180, here: p. 171.

19 M. Jahoda: The emergence of social psychology in Vienna: An exercise in long-term memory. In: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1983), pp. 343–349.

20 J. R. P. French / B. Raven: The bases of social power. In: *Studies in social power,* ed. by D. Cartwright, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1959, pp. 150–167; J. W. Thibaut / H. H. Kelley: *The social psychology of groups*, Oxford: Wiley 1959.

21 J. R. Overbeck: Concepts and historical perspectives on power. In: *The Social Psychology of Power*, ed. by A. Guinote and T. K. Vescio, NY, New York, NY: Guilford Publications 2010, pp. 19–45.

22 E.g., E. Dépret / S. T. Fiske: Social cognition and power: Some cognitive consequences of social structure as a source of control deprivation. In: *Control motivation and social cognition*, ed. by F. G. G. Weary / K. Marsh,New York, NY: Springer-Verlag 1993, pp.176–202.

this approach within the field, Overbeck writes "[t]he outcome control definition is useful for psychologists because of its tractability and relatively bounded scope. It is easily manipulated in a laboratory setting and is well suited to meeting the need for experimental control."[23] This speaks directly to how the larger trends toward mechanization have created methodological pressures favoring certain operationalizations of the construct. The value of these operationalizations are generally determined by how well they fit into the cognitive or behavioral formula into which they are plugged. The fact that its *form* has become its *function* within mechanistic formulas is perhaps most clearly seen in priming methods in which the exact content of power is irrelevant, such as commonly used priming techniques in which research participants are asked to imagine a situation in which they had (or did not have) power. Such approaches have proven to be valuable to the field in that they have helped to shed light on many of the powerful and surprising effects that power can have in our social world. To state this differently, by treating power as an independent variable that can be turned "on" or "off" we are gaining a richer picture of what power can do to many of the "dependent variables" in our social lives.

When reflecting on power in social psychology, it is important to keep in mind the contested nature of power. It is easy to expand our understanding of the construct so as to include research on a large number of phenomena, such as stereotypes, prejudice, negotiations, leadership, decision-making, persuasion, social capital, or collective identity. There are also a variety of approaches to thinking about power in addition to the quantitative-capacity views, such as consent-based perspectives, functionalist approaches, identity based approaches, and personal power (however, these all also generally tend to share the same basic theoretical and methodological assumptions discussed above, as they have all arisen out of the shared history of the field). Similarly, it is important to keep in mind that there are significant variations in theoretical and methodological approaches to power in social psychology. Social psychologists can and do work on different levels of analysis, with some focusing primarily on the power of individuals abstracted from their social context (e.g. as in the notion of *agentic capacity*) while others look more at the relational nature of power (as in power *over* another) or that bound to collectives (as in the *Social Identity Approach*). While the study of information processing may tend to focus on individuals, work within the framework of *System Justification Theory*, *Social Dominance Orientation*, or the *Social Identity Approach* is generally more relational in nature. Certain broader theoretical approaches will obviously tend to produce research with a certain balance of individual versus relational understandings of power (e.g. a functionalist perspective may tend to favor its relational nature, while personality psychology may favor a more individual focus). The combination of these various theoretical emphases with the broader

23 Overbeck: Concepts and historical perspectives on power, p. 22.

mechanistic approach of psychology more broadly has lead to an explosion of research within a variety of niche areas, such as social attention and perception, stereotyping and self-stereotyping, affect and emotion, the use of heuristics, and risk taking. There are new and interesting studies emerging all the time.

We have learned a great deal by the increased precision afforded by the focus on power as an independent variable that can be used within quantitative experiments. It has however, come with costs. This approach has required us to see the social world as a series of fixed, measurable variables, and thus we have largely overlooked various other elements, such as its relational nature and the processes by which it emerges (and dissipates). This general tendency towards the artificial but strategic narrowing of the research scope is nicely illustrated by Stanley Milgram's classic experiments on obedience. While they were widely reported as speaking to straightforward proof of the human tendency to follow authority, and they largely continue to be taught as such, scholars have been drawing our attention to the more complex picture that the experiments paint.[24] There were numerous versions of the study run, and considerably more variation in the findings than were widely reported. However, in his publications this complexity was generally passed over by Milgram, whose scientific fame is owed largely to his ability to speak the language of his times; the language of quantified psychological phenomena defined by their operationalization within controlled experiments of mechanistic cause and effect.

It has also been pointed out that social psychological research stands to gain a lot from a more cross-cultural perspective. For instance, its focus on the individual locus power is arguably in part a product of the "Western" environment in which it has been studied, something that might look very different were it to be studied in the "East" where power is often understood in relational and consensual terms.[25] Even the more relational approaches within the field, such as the *Social Identity Approach*, have been challenged in this respect, particularly the approach's "Western" focus on relative group status versus the "Eastern" awareness of social networks.[26] Similarly, the overall division between the *approach* tendencies of the powerful and the *avoidance* tendencies of the powerless may look very different in cultural contexts where self-control is seen as a sign of power and status. Within our own culturally-bound thinking on power, the notion that power is understood

24 For example, N. J. C. Russell: Milgram's obedience to authority experiments: Origins and early evolution. In: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50 (2011), pp. 140–162.

25 For example, see C. Zhong / J. C. Magee / W. Maddux / A. D. Galinsky: Power, culture, and action: Considerations in the expression and enactment of power in East Asian and Western societies. In: *National Culture and Groups (Research on Managing Groups and Teams* 9*,* ed. by Y. Chen, Brandford: Emerald Group Publishing Limited 2006, pp. 53–73.

26 M. Yuki: Intergroup comparison versus intragroup relationships: A cross-cultural examination of social identity theory in North American and East Asian cultural contexts. In: *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66 (2003), pp. 166–183.

as individual agency rather than sociability may speak to a heavily gendered understanding of the construct, where stereotypically male traits (individual strength and assertiveness) are understood to be central to the concept, while stereotypically female traits (collective bonding and passivity) are understood as being its opposite.

Building on the general tendency to see power as an independent variable defined in quantitative-capacity terms and construed as an objectively measurable object, experimental findings have been pointing to largely consistent differences between those who are classified as the "powerful" and as the "powerless."[27] These two categories of power tend to relate differently to the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of *approach* (*self-agency* or *competence*) and *avoidance* (*other-profitability* or *warmth*), with the powerful being more agentic and exhibiting patterns of approach and the powerless being more sociable and avoidant. Recently however, a number of findings have suggested that this pattern is not as straightforward as it would seem. For example, the powerful have been called lazy processors of information, but also efficient information processors, both inattentive to the environment and hyper-attentive to the environment, and rigid adherents to heuristics and stereotypes, but also flexible in the face of new information. This abundance of crisscrossing findings has lead to increased attention being placed on situational and motivational variation in the expression of power. For example, it has been suggested that power affords greater flexibility in information processing, by allowing the power holder to either deliberately process information or to use quick information processing heuristics, depending upon their goals and the given situation. In general, power can be thought of as allowing for greater cognitive and behavioral situational variability, as in the *Situated Theory of Power*.[28]

These developments in the social cognition of power would appear to speak to the value of additive approaches to defining power, in that various findings can be compiled to create a more complete picture of the phenomenon:

> It may be less useful to seek a unified definition of power than to focus on systematic mapping of how effects of power covary with the kind of power studied; that is, perhaps we are always consigned to study just one limited aspect of power at a time, but we can do so deliberately and explicitly, using multiple perspectives and approaches in programmatic research.[29]

27 D. Keltner / D. H. Gruenfeld / C. Anderson: Power, approach, and inhibition. In: *Psychological Review* 110 (2003), pp. 265–284.

28 A. Guinote: The situated focus theory of power. In: *The social psychology of power*, ed. by A. Guinote / T. K. Vescio, New York, NY: Guilford Press 2010, pp. 141–173. For a discussion of these various findings within social psychological research on social cognition see A. Guinote: Social cognition of power. In: *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 1: *Attitudes and Social Cognition*, ed. by M. Mikulincer / P. R. Shaver, Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association 2015, pp. 547–569.

29 Overbeck: Concepts and historical perspectives on power, p. 32

In some ways this approach resembles compiling a puzzle, with the picture we see of power being understood as becoming clearer the more pieces we add. The fact that the pieces are of different shapes and sizes, and that they contain different colors and patterns, is not a problem but a plus. This approach also speaks to a potentially powerful generative machine, one that can fuel publications, train new researchers, and graft itself nicely onto quantitative "outcome-based" or "performance-based" funding. What is more, this approach can also encourage what is simply interesting and thought provoking research.

What we can also expect from this approach, is that it will guarantee surprises, not only in the form of novel research findings that can be put together like differing but complementary puzzle pieces, but surprises that challenge the fundamental assumptions with which we are working. As a result of being vested in particular operationalizations of power, from time to time social psychologists will be surprised to learn not only that there are other ways to understand power, but that these different understandings call for qualitative changes to how we think about the phenomenon. We can see an illustrative example of this in recent discussions concerning social justice in the light of both the prejudice reduction and collective action traditions. There is growing evidence that the successful reduction of intergroup psychological tensions and the increase of positive intergroup affect can actually help to stabilize systemic inequalities and injustice, something that has been call the *sedative effects* or the *ironic effects* of prejudice reduction.[30] The reduction of prejudiced attitudes is no longer understood to be the panacea to our societal ills. Similarly, both advantaged and disadvantaged communities may be motivated to perceive the social system as just, even deeply unjust systems (e.g. according to *System Justification Theory* and such early writings as that by Ichheiser[31]). Such findings can arguably not simply be added to our current body of knowledge, but challenge us to rethink the fundamental assumptions that guide our research and thinking on power.[32] In the case of the *sedative effects* of prejudice reduction, they can challenge us to shift many of our basic research foci within thinking on power and social justice: from focusing on the powerful to focusing on the powerless; from trying to reduce prejudice to trying to encourage social action; from examining intergroup collaboration to examining the roots of resistance; from concentrating the cognitive processes of the individual to that of the collective; from focusing on the current moment of study to exploring the historical

30 J. Dixon / M. Levine / S. Reicher / K. Durrheim: Beyond prejudice: Are negative evaluations the problem and is getting us to like one another more the solution? In: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 35 (2012), pp. 1–56.

31 G. Ichheiser: O pewnych sprzecznościach w dziedzinie selekcyji społecznych. In: *Przewodnik Pracy Społecznej* 5 (1936), pp. 129–134.

32 J. Dixon [et al.]: Beyond prejudice. For a less confrontational view, see L. B. Mazur: Prejudice reduction and collective action: A conflict or confluence of interests? In: *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3–2 (2015), pp. 291–308.

contingency of privilege; from studying psychological outcomes to studying tangible outcomes (e.g. economics), etc.

These developments often come as a surprise to the field, in that they are met with suspicion and resistance; we are surprised to learn that power is not entirely captured by our contemporary (implicitly "logical positivist"[33]) thinking. As Ichheiser pointed out, we are all heavily influenced by the environments in which we find ourselves, but it is perhaps ironic that we as social psychologists are often the last to notice this in our own thinking.[34] This has been pointed to as a partial explanation of why social psychologists so often put forward research findings regarding what they take to be the "surprising" situational influences on cognition or behavior.[35] In promulgating an early version of the *fundamental attribution error*, by which we attribute the action of others to their inherent qualities and not to the situation, Ichheiser was careful to point out that this is most likely an artifact of our cultural focus on individuality,[36] thus anticipating the cross-cultural challenges the *fundamental attribution error* would eventually face.[37]

It is not so much that we don't yet have enough of the pieces to see the bigger picture. More pieces arguably won't help. It is precisely our ability to rip out singular pieces of the puzzle, ignoring all the rest, that provides this approach with its utility. As Jacob Bronowski wrote,

> This is the paradox of imagination in science, that it has for its aim the impoverishment of imagination. By that outrageous phrase, I mean that the highest flight of scientific imagination is to weed out the proliferation of new ideas. In science, the grand view is a miserly view, and a rich model of the universe is one which is as poor as possible in hypotheses.[38]

The notion that the shortcomings of our "scientific" study of power can be addressed by triangulating in on the concept additively misses this crucial point; that mechanistic operationalization is powerful not such much in that it gets us to what power *really is*, but in its ability to in effect ignore the infinite possibilities of what else it could be. This approach can help shed light on the workings of the other

33 On the explicite links between Logical Positivism and psychology, see L. D. Smith: *Behaviorism and Logical Positivism: A Reassessment of the Alliance*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1986.

34 See G. Ichheiser: Misinterpretations of personality in everyday life and the psychologist's frame of reference. In: *Character and Personality* 12 (1943), pp. 145–160.

35 L. Ross: The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in attribution processes. In: *Cognitive Theories in Social Psychology,* ed. by L. Berkowitz, New York, NY: Academic Press 1977, pp. 173–220.

36 P. Boski / F. W. Rudman: Ichheiser's theories of personality and person perception: A classic that still inspires. In: *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 19 (1989), pp. 263–296.

37 Such as that in J. G. Miller: Culture and the development of everyday social explanation. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46 (1984), pp. 961–978.

38 Bronowski: *The Identity of Man*, p. 46.

puzzle pieces (or their various combinations), but it does not necessarily bring us closer to seeing some sort of absolute larger picture, that is, understanding what power is *at its core.*

What is more, the drive towards new research to fill in the gaps in our knowledge creates a motivation towards "fact collecting" that can obscure the ideological, and variable nature of the foundations on which such approaches rest. Returning once again to Ichheiser, a psychology that does not take into account the unconscious ideological and cultural influences on it own research "is in great danger of becoming a victim of a pseudo empiricism, which […] may be very well bolstered by pseudo verifications. And no refined statistical methods will be of any help if the original data are already distorted and falsified by those misinterpretations."[39] Additive approaches can also lead to "classificatory *ad hoc*-ery," with the resulting models creating haphazard classificatory boxes into which we place fragmented pieces of our actual experience of power, a tendency that can make its initial goal of analytical generalization more difficult.[40]

It is often difficult to see how ideology shapes our construal of fact, something that is particularly difficult in the case of quantification and measurement with their assumptions of objectivity.[41] The very notion of objectivity arose historically, and radically changed how we see the world, including how we approach scientific theorizing and what we understand to count as evidence.[42] It aims at separating the researcher from the object of study, with intercourse between the two occurring only via ostensibly neutral techniques and tools (their human creation being generally ignored). This historical shift in thinking has lead to tremendous advances in knowledge, and yet it is not at all neutral in speaking only to objective "facts." Rather, in highlighting certain approaches (not just findings) it can also in effect silence other approaches (and potential results). A classic example of such scientific housecleaning is the removal of *introspection* from psychological research at the turn of the 19th century, something that had been at the core of psychology since its beginnings.[43] However, given the fundamental importance of phenomenolog-

39 G. Ichheiser: Misinterpretations of personality in everyday life and the psychologist's frame of reference. In: *Character and Personality* 12 (1943), pp. 145–160, see: p. 145.

40 R. Jenkins: The ways and means of power. Efficacy and resources. In: (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, ed. by S. Clegg / M. Haugaard, London: SAGE Publications, Ltd. 2009, pp. 140–157, see: p. 152.

41 J. Michell: Quantitative science and the definition of measurement in psychology. In: *British Journal of Psychology* 88 (1997), pp. 355-383.

42 L. Daston / P. Galison: *Objectivity*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books 2007. For the case of psychology in particular, see K. Danziger: *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research,* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1990, and A. V. Yurevich: Cognitive frames in psychology: demarcations and ruptures. In: *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 43 (2009), pp. 89–103.

43 E. Schwitzgebel: Introspection, In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), ed. by E. N. Zalta. Retrieved from: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/introspection/ [15.11.15].

ical experience to the very notion of psychology,[44] such concepts cannot be entirely exorcised from the field, as can be seen, for example, with introspection's subtle return to psychological research in work on such fundamentally important notions as *well-being*[45] and both *pain*[46] and *pleasure.*[47]

Power as a lens *for the study* of our social world

As discussed above, the mechanistic approach to the study of our social world can save us from sinking over our heads in the "definitional quagmire" by providing useful, operational definitions. Rather than taking this increasingly myopic approach, however, others have gone in the opposite direction; opting to conceptualize key constructs not as objects *of* analysis, but rather as intellectual tools that can be used *for* analysis. In effect, rather than operationalizing the construct in a manner suitable for insertion into various causal chains, they conceptualize it as the lens through which they are examining the world. This approach asks how the social world might look when examined through the lens of power, and how such a lens might allow for insights into our social lives that are not afforded us by other perspectives. This is the fundamental difference between *cross-cultural psychology*, which generally treats culture as an independent variable, and some approaches to *cultural psychology* such as that advocated by Valsiner[48] that see culture as a term for the overarching semiotic processes that color all meaningful human engagement with the world. *Cross-cultural psychology* generally sees cultures as things we can (or cannot) step between, while this version of *cultural psychology* sees culture as the socially bound processes of meaning making that we never leave. This approach can also alleviate definitional overload by elevating the level of analysis. As the scope of research on power has increasingly widened, some (such as Foucault) have come to see power as being "everywhere." In this spirit, it has been suggested

44 J. Valsiner: Transformations and flexible forms: where qualitative psychology begins. In: *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 4–4 (2005), pp. 39–57.

45 D. Kahneman / E. Diener / N. Schwartz: *Well-being: Foundations of hedonic psychology*, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation 2003.

46 D. D. Price / M. Aydede: The experimental use of introspection in the scientific study of pain and its integration with third-person methodologies: The experiential-phenomenological approach. In: *Pain: New essays on its nature and the methodology of its study*, ed. by M. Aydede, Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press 2005, pp. 243–273; A. C. Williams / H. Talfryn / O. Davies / Y. Chadury: Simple pain rating scales hide complex idiosyncratic meanings. In: *Pain* 85 (2000), pp. 457–463.

47 D. M. Haybron: Philosophy and the science of subjective well-being. In: *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, ed. by M. Eid / R. J. Larsen, New York, NY: Guilford Press 2008, pp. 17–43.

48 J. Valsiner: Introduction: Culture in psychology: A renewed encounter of inquisitive minds. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, ed. by J. Valsinger, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, pp. 3–24.

that power itself might very well be better understood as a broader lens *for* study, rather than as the object *of* study,[49] similar to the notions of the economy or culture.

In laying out an alternate path to the one suggested by the mechanistic study of psychological phenomena, Valsiner[50] points out three general oversights that tend to color that approach: (1) the elimination of the dynamic flow of experience by creating static and measurable constructs, (2) the removal of nested hierarchies, and their replacement by horizontal causal chains, and (3) the removal the immediate context, often by research methods that are assumed to be "context free." Similarly, as mechanistic operationalization is generally built on frozen slices of time, we tend to overlook the dialogical nature of psychological phenomena as well as their continual *emergence.*[51] Something similar has been pointed out regarding power within the intergroup context, with scholars drawing attention to how collective identities develop over time and across social interactions, with power struggles being better studied as social processes rather that static, predetermined mechanisms.[52]

Similarly, while statistical techniques can be very powerful tools that can shed light on areas of human psychology that we would not see "with the naked eye," they are also generally based on numerous fundamental assumptions, such as normal distribution, consistency, independence of samples, and random sampling.[53] Power is generally not, however, conceptualized or studied in a manner that would reflect a normal distribution, consistency, independence of samples or random examination. Similarly, just as the psychometric qualities psychological states (e.g. their measurability on Likert scales) is more assumed rather than supported,[54] basic questions regarding our ability to quantitatively measure power abound. Despite the fact that such observations arguably challenge the core of psychological research, including that on power, a considerable body of influential research continues to be produced in this experimental tradition. At the same time, the abundance of research produced is what also leads to the sense that we are simply "gathering facts"[55] or acting as "butterfly collectors,"[56] in other words, putting our findings on the shelf without really knowing what we are to do with them.

49 For example, see R. Jenkins: The ways and means of power.

50 J. Valsiner: Integrating psychology within the globalizing world: A *requiem* to the post-modernist experiment with *Wissenshaft*. In: *Integrated Psychological and Behavioral Sciences* 43 (2009), pp. 1–21.

51 C. Cunha / J. Salgado: Being human: Experience and communicating. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 41 (2007), pp. 164–170.

52 For example, J. Drury / S. Reicher: Collective action and psychological change: The emergence of new social identities. In: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39 (2000), pp. 579–604.

53 M. Maruyama: Heterogram analysis: Where the assumption of normal distribution is illogical. In: *Human Systems Management* 18 (1999), pp. 53–60.

54 Michell: *Measurement in Psychology*.

55 J. Valsiner: Integrating psychology within the globalizing world, p. 5

56 Leach cited in Jenkins: The ways and means of power, p. 152

In the face of both the productivity of mechanistic research and the kinds of objections thereto mentioned above, it would seem that social psychology would be in a unique position to capitalize on both. By definition, social psychology should be able to illustrate the situated, dynamic and variable nature of power. In this spirit, early researchers, such as Tajfel, studied relative understandings of power, not absolute ones. However, as discussed above, this is generally not the approach the field has taken. Work on dynamic intergroup identities and relations has largely embraced static dichotomous identities,[57] just as work on power has primarily embraced the ostensibly objective study of power within wider mechanistic formula.

To be fair, empirical research and theorizing on power within social psychology is certainly much broader and more diverse that what has been quickly presented here, all the more so the broader one thinks of the concept (including such key words as social influence, stereotypes, or discrimination). Similarly, important questions are being asked about how we understand power within our own research. For example, within research on the psychological differences between those possessing valued resources and those not in possession of them, it has been suggested that the field should also ask why, when and by whom those resources are valued in the first place, and how both consensus and conflict constitute power.[58] At the same time, one can see how in searching for answers to such questions it is easy to be pulled down the proverbial rabbit's hole, scrambling to address one question after the other, as if facing the eternal "but why?" of a child, which both beautifully and horrifically greets each subsequent answer. The two options to this challenge discussed above, either narrowing our focus or expanding our focus, would seem to provide a temporary solution; a babysitter who does not make the source of the "why?" questions disappear, but at least provides us with some much needed respite.

Conclusion

Like the study of power, the study of economics can take many forms. One such approach might very well focus on the buying power of the U.S. dollar, discovering for instance, that a certain combination of coins allows for the purchase of a bus ticket from a ticket vending machine in a particular city. Such an approach to the study of the economy would lead to surprise were a Canadian coin to creep into our pocket, unbeknownst to us, a coin that to our surprise does not work in the machine. This can pose practical questions (as in, Why does it physically not work in the machine?), but it can also give rise to more fundamental questions regarding the nature of the economy in general (Why is its value different? Why isn't it ac-

57 L. B. Mazur: Prejudice reduction and collective action.

58 e.g. B. Simon / P. Oakes: Beyond dependence: An identity approach to social power and domination. In: *Human Relations* 59 (2006), pp. 105–139.

cepted in this particular place? Etc.). Any time we are wedded to particular definitions or operationalizations, we can expect such surprises. Studying the buying power of the dollar in a myriad of ways is tremendously important, interesting, useful and valuable (while a bus ticket may seem trivial, the price of oil or education certainly do not). At the same time, an increasing number of such studies does not necessarily provide a fuller picture of what the economy is in itself, if for no other reason than that the phenomenon is continuously changing, not only aside from our study of it, but often precisely as a result of studying it. Such is also the case with the notion of power.

Given the primacy of quantitative research methods within social psychology, and especially as interesting findings continue to arise from such research, we can expect power to be primarily treated as an objectively measurable variable, usually an independent variable, within wider causal chains. This shift from asking what power *is*, to what power *does*, can temporary alleviate our *Cartesian anxiety,*[59] our search for ontological certainty in the scientific method, even if in the process it speeds up the frequency with which we require a fix. This challenge cannot be remedied by additive approaches alone, as the utility of this method is bound precisely to the poverty, as Bronowski called it, of the operationalizations it implies. Power is testable in this manner only by being shrunk into such ostensibly objective forms, like the economy being tested when thought of in the form of a particular coin inserted into a particular machine in a particular location. This approach is incredibly powerful. However, in as far as we expect such an accumulation of facts to lead to *the* objective definitional core of the construct, we can also expect that from time to time the rug will be pulled out from under us.

59 R. Bernstein: *Beyond objectivism and relativism. Science, hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 1983.