NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Business Students' Preferences in the Use of French and Raven's Five Bases of Power

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Introduction

French and Raven divided power into five bases. These power bases are: referent power, expert power, legitimate power, reward power, and coercive power. Reward power is derived from an individual's personality. Charisma would be an example of this. Expert power comes from knowledge and/or information. A person's position or authority may give them legitimate power. Reward power stems from the ability to supply rewards. Finally, coercive power comes from the ability to punish or threaten to punish.

Study Purpose

People may use these power bases at work, at home, or in the case of this study at school. This study is aimed at discovering which power bases Northern Illinois University business students use in their positions as students. It must be noted that this study is not meant to imply any cause effect relationship between the course and/or instructors and student preferences. It is meant only to reveal what the students' preferences are.

Hypotheses

With the help of research done in the area of power, I developed four hypotheses. (The research referred to consisted of examining 12 studies done on the use of power. An annotated bibliography of these studies is provided in the appendix of this report.) From the results of these studies I was able to form some ideas as to which power bases are used more than others. The conclusions I came to can be observed in the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 - The business students will prefer to use referent power the most.
Hypothesis 2 - The students will prefer to use, equally, expert and legitimate power second most.
Hypothesis 3 - Reward power will be the second least preferred power base.
Hypothesis 4 - Coercive power will be the least preferred power base of the students.

Being a business student myself also influenced the development of these hypotheses. My experiences of using power myself and observing other students' use of power influenced the hypotheses.

Method

A survey was developed to measure the students' preferences of French and Raven's power bases. The survey consisted of 22 statements that were to be rated by the students on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly
agree. (A copy of this survey is provided in the appendix.) The statements were modified from statements on a survey of French and Raven's power bases that appeared in Dieterly and Schneider's "The Effect of Organizational Environment on Perceived Power and Climate: A Laboratory Study" study that appeared in the June 1974 issue of Organizational Behavior and Human Performance. Each of the 22 statements was related to one of the power bases. Statements 1, 4, 7, 10, and 20 related to referent power, 2, 5, 8, 11, and 21 to expert power, 3, 6, 9, and 14 to legitimate power, 13, 16, and 17 to reward power, and 12, 15, 18, 19, and 22 were related to coercive power. Some of the statements were reverse coded. For these statements a response of 1 was given a value of 5, 2 a value of 4, 3 is still 3, 4 a value of 2, and 5 a value of 1 when calculating the mean. This was done because the statements showed a lack of the power base. The end of the survey contained demographic information including class, gender, age, and major.

Samples
Students from two courses, Management 333 and Management 468, offered in Northern Illinois University's College of Business were surveyed. These two courses were chosen because all business majors are required to take these two courses, and between the two a variety of juniors and seniors would be available.

Procedures
I conducted the survey in two sections of Management 468. I explained why I was giving the survey and instructed the students how to complete the survey. The students completed the surveys in a few minutes and they were collected. The students in the Management 333 classes were given the survey by their teacher's assistants. The survey process was completed in a similar manner as the Management 468 classes. The teacher's assistants then returned the surveys to me.

Analyses
The results were compiled and totals for each of the demographic factors and the total sample were tabulated. Means were calculated for each statement as well as for each group of statements that related to each of the power base. In other words, means for each of the power bases were calculated. Z values were then found to test the significance of differences in mean values of the five power bases.

Results
A total of 118 business students were surveyed. Two (1.7%) of which were graduate students. 51 and 43.2% were seniors, and 65 and 55.1% were juniors. Accountancy majors accounted for 19.5% or 23 students, management majors were 24 students or 20.3%, finance was the major of 25 or 21.2% of the students, operations management information systems majors accounted for 16.2% or 19 students, and 27 or 22.9% of the students were marketing majors. 62 and 52.5% of the students were male, and the remaining 56 or 47.5% were female. The students age was requested for, but since nearly all of the students fell within the same 4 year age span this factor was disregarded.
Two of the four hypotheses were supported by the results of the survey. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported, and hypotheses 3 and 4 were not. The preference of the students was from highest to lowest: referent power, expert power, legitimate power, coercive power, and reward power. At a significance level of .01, which means the results can be assumed to be 99% accurate, hypothesis 1 is supported. The mean value of statements related to referent power was 3.702 and the next highest mean, which is that of expert power, was 3.466. The Z value of this difference is 4.04. In order for the difference of these means to be significant at a .01 level the difference needs to be outside of the -2.516 and 2.516 range. So, with a value of 4.04 the difference can be considered significant and referent power can be considered the most preferred base of power.

Hypothesis 2 is supported at the same significance level. the means of expert and legitimate power were 3.466 and 3.460 respectively. The Z value of 0.10 falls within the -2.516 and 2.516 range so there is no significant difference between the means of expert and legitimate power, so the two can be considered equally preferred. Also, the lower of the two means, 3.460, is significantly higher than the next highest mean, which is that of coercive power at 3.003. The Z value of this difference is 7.90 which is well outside the range needed to be considered significant.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were not supported. The mean of reward power was 2.878 which is lower than the mean of coercive power, which is 3.003. This shows that reward power, not coercive power, is the least preferred base of power. This is only true at a .10 significance level though. At lower significance levels, which would imply more accuracy with the results, reward and coercive power means would not be considered significantly different, which means that they would be preferred equally. In this case hypotheses 3 and 4 may be considered partially supported.

Demographic factors were also considered, but no demographic group seemed to differ from the tendencies of the whole sample.

Discussion

Both my hypotheses and the actual results may need some explanation as to why they were predicted to occur and why they occurred. First, I will explain why I predicted the student preferences as I did. I chose referent power to be the most preferred because the people affected by the power admire the characteristics of the personality of the possessor of the referent power. This makes it effective and looked at in a positive manner by all parties. I feel that these qualities make referent power the most preferred. I chose expert and legitimate power to be the second most preferred for a similar reason. People possessing expert and/or legitimate power have this power(s) as a result of special knowledge or holding a position of authority. This can cause people to respect those who posses these powers. This respect makes these powers effective and looked at in a neutral, if not positive, manner. Reward power was chosen to be fourth because it is effective only if it is used sparingly. If people are continually rewarded they will come to expect rewards regardless of behavior. When this happens reward power diminishes. Coercive power was predicted to be least preferred because it is looked at in a negative manner. This is true because people do not like to be punished, most people do not enjoy giving punishment either.
I believe that the results that supported hypotheses 1 and 2 occurred for the reasons I gave for predicting the results as I did. Availability of sources of power I feel is the reason for hypotheses 3 and 4 not being supported. Reward power was preferred least possibly because students are not able to reward other students. The most reward power a student usually has is the ability to compliment peers. Students do not have much coercive power either. This would explain why it was preferred nearly equally with reward power. Nearly the only form of coercive power students have is the ability to give negative peer evaluations in group projects.

Limitations

There are several limitation to this study. First, the sample is from only one university. So, it could, at most, show the preferences of business students only at Northern Illinois University. Second, the survey used was adapted from a survey that was used in laboratory setting. The use of this survey in an actual situation may limit the accuracy of the study. It should also be noted that this study simplifies the use of power. The sources of power are limited to the five bases proposed by French and Raven. There have been many other studies done that show other forms of power may be used, and that power is more complicated than five power bases.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations I believe this study does provide results of accurate student preferences in the use of French and Raven's five bases of power. When thought about in a logical manner it is sensible that the results occurred as they did. Even though this study focused on business students, I think that it is fairly representative of the preferences of people in general.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Monica Hoseth and Terry Bishop for allowing my survey to be taken by their students in their Management 468 and 333 classes. I would also like to give special thanks to Christine Scheck who provided help guidance, help, and advice throughout the duration of this project and study.
Dallas Szafranski

Annotated Bibliography


This study examined how power bases are related to and affect each other. It also looks at how the power bases are correlated with job satisfaction, satisfaction with supervision, and performance. The authors found that reward, referent, expert, and coercive powers are perceived to be sources of power if the powerholder has legitimate power. The study also showed that expert and referent powers are strongly correlated with satisfaction with supervision. Legitimate and reward powers are weakly correlated, and coercive power is significantly, negatively related to satisfaction with supervision. The same relationships were found to be true with job satisfaction, except that legitimate and reward powers showed no correlation. Reward and expert powers were strongly related to performance, and referent and legitimate powers were marginally related. Coercive power was found to be unrelated to performance.


This study examined the relationships among subordinates perceived leader reinforcement behaviors and the five bases of power. Specifically, the effects of the use of contingent and noncontingent reward and coercive powers were examined. The results showed that managers would benefit from using contingent rewards, avoid using noncontingent rewards and punishments, and use contingent punishments when necessary.


This study investigated the relationships between measures, as perceived by subordinates, of supervisor influence and power. Six supervisory tactics were examined: rationality, assertiveness, upward appeals and sanctions, ingratiation, coalitions, and exchange. No significant relationships were found for ingratiation, exchange, or coalitions. Rationality was found to enhance attributions of positively-viewed bases of power, and assertiveness and upward appeals and sanctions were found to have the opposite effect.

This paper attempted to identify conditions when groups and institutions influence attitudes and behavior. It was found that groups with expert and referent powers influenced attitudes. Groups with reward and coercive powers influenced behaviors independently of attitudes. Although French and Raven thought it influenced attitudes, the role of legitimate power was found to be unclear in this study.


This study examined the effectiveness of the bases of power in influencing compliance and satisfaction with supervision. It showed that expert and referent powers were positively associated with compliance and satisfaction, and legitimate power was positively associated with compliance but negatively associated with satisfaction. Coercive and reward powers were found to not be significantly associated with compliance or satisfaction.


This study examined the relationships of the bases of power to subordinate's organizational commitment, satisfaction, and attitudinal and behavioral compliance. Referent power was found to be positively correlated to all four variables. Expert power was positively associated with commitment and attitudinal compliance. Legitimate power was positively correlated with behavioral compliance.


This study investigated the relationships of supervisory power to styles of handling conflict with subordinates, subordinate compliance, and satisfaction with supervision. Reward power was found to be positively associated with integrating and avoiding styles of handling conflict. Legitimate power was correlated with a dominating style. Expert power was positively correlated with integrating and dominating but
negatively associated with avoiding style. Referent power was positively associated with integrating, obliging, and compromising but negatively correlated with dominating. Legitimate power was also positively related to behavioral and attitudinal compliance. Referent power was positively associated with satisfaction.


This paper updated the original model of bases of power by French and Raven. The new model separated coercive and reward powers into personal and impersonal forms. Legitimate power is divided up into formal legitimacy, legitimacy of reciprocity, legitimacy of equity, and legitimacy of dependence. Expert and referent powers are separated into positive and negative forms. Information power has been added and separated into direct and indirect forms.


This paper examined the effects that a supervisor's sex, experience, and focus had on preferences for referent, expert, and legitimate power bases. The study showed that men preferred to use referent power more than women, and that supervisors with little experience preferred referent power more than more experienced supervisors. Expert power was more popular with supervisors who focused on trainee self-awareness than supervisors who focused on trainee's conceptualization skills. No other significant differences were found.


This article summarizes several criticisms of commonly used measures of French and Raven's power bases, demonstrates that the measures have poor reliability, and show that the measures distort relationships with subordinate outcome variables.

This study examined how supervisors use social power in workgroups. Referent and expert powers were used more frequently than the other bases of power. It was also found that as the number of subordinates increased so did the use of coercive power.


This study investigated whether the perceive interpersonal power of a woman is affected by the clothing she wears. A woman wearing a jacket was perceived to have more legitimate and expert power than a woman not wearing a jacket. No other difference in perceived power were found.
Please respond to the following items based on your feelings as a student. Circle the appropriate response.

1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE, 2 = DISAGREE, 3 = NEUTRAL, 4 = AGREE, 5 = STRONGLY AGREE

1. I attempt to set a good example for other students. 1 2 3 4 5
2. My ability gives me an advantage as a student. 1 2 3 4 5
3. The decisions I make are of critical importance. 1 2 3 4 5
4. My personality allows me to perform well as a student. 1 2 3 4 5
5. My previous experience prepared me to be a college student. 1 2 3 4 5
6. Other students look to me for guidance. 1 2 3 4 5
7. I do not get along well with other students. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I find it difficult to be a student. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I consistently make the correct decisions. 1 2 3 4 5
10. I frequently have arguments as a student. 1 2 3 4 5
11. I have no difficulty being a student. 1 2 3 4 5
12. In group projects, I can punish lower level group members. 1 2 3 4 5
13. I seldom disapprove of group members' proposed ideas. 1 2 3 4 5
14. Group members do not respect my authority. 1 2 3 4 5
15. It is my responsibility to check on other group members. 1 2 3 4 5
16. I do not control the fate of group members. 1 2 3 4 5
17. It is not my responsibility to reprimand other group members. 1 2 3 4 5
18. My evaluation of group members can be an important determinant of their performance. 1 2 3 4 5
19. If I correctly approve group members' ideas they will be rewarded. 1 2 3 4 5
20. My fellow students look to me as their informal leader. 1 2 3 4 5
21. The tasks required as a college student are not similar to others I have done. 1 2 3 4 5
22. My diligence reduces error. 1 2 3 4 5

Class: Senior  Junior  Sophomore  Freshman  Grad. Student
Gender: Male  Female
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