

Introduction to Power Structure Research

Power structure research studies the distribution of power in social systems and the existence of dominant classes or groups.

- which group or groups are dominant?
- how to they achieve and maintain their dominance?
- how cohesive or unified are they?

What is power? A has power over B if A can get B to do something s/he would not otherwise do. Hence power is a relationship of potential conflict, although power varies in the degree to which it is coercive or non-coercive (legitimate).

What are the empirical indicators of power?

- Who benefits? (systemic or class power): Who receives the greatest share of the good things in life?
- Who governs? (structural or positional power): Who holds the top offices or positions of formal authority in society?
- Who wins? (situational power): Who prevails in conflicts over decisions affecting the society?

Control of key resources is the basis for exercising power in society.

- Material wealth.
- Social status and connections.
- Control over the apparatus of the state.
- Possibly others (weapons, knowledge, charisma, physical strength, sex appeal, etc.).

Economic primacy thesis: economic wealth tends to be the dominant source of power in society because of its importance to human material well-being, its high degree of concentration, and its ease of conversion into other power resources.

Three main types of power elites:

- Economic elite (corporate elite, capitalist class).
- Social/cultural elite (upper social class, aristocracy).
- Political elite (governing class, policy-making elite).

Some questions for research on power elites:

- Who belongs to each of these elite groups?
- What empirical indicators best define these elite groups?
- How cohesive or unified are these elite groups?
- How is this cohesion achieved and maintained?
- What divisions or conflicts are there within and between these elite groups?
- What is the nature and source of these conflicts?
- How much overlap or association is there between economic, social, and political elites?