

Acting with Power

*Why We Are More Powerful
Than We Believe*

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PROFILE BOOKS

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Acting with Power

Introduction

The Problem with Power



I found this drawing in the farthest reaches of a file drawer at my mother's house. I knew right away who it was. The person has too many eyes, a closed mouth, and no real arms or hands. She sees everything but can't act on what she knows. It's me, in my first self-portrait, drawn when I was three.

Looking at me now, the resemblance may not be obvious. I'm a chaired professor at Stanford University who has been studying, writing, and teaching about the psychology of power for over twenty-five years. I have an exciting career. I have a voice and I know how to use it. Today, the first self-portraits of my own children are stashed

somewhere in the farthest reaches of a file drawer in *my* house. A lot has changed since I was three, but that little stick-person is definitely still with me.

There was a time when I thought it was just me who felt this way. But if I've learned anything in my work on power, it's that I am not alone. Everyone feels powerless sometimes, no matter how much power they have. And we all have power, whether we can realize it or not.

It's not intuitive. But the idea of power can make us feel small. In part, it's that we learn about power in childhood, at a time in our lives when we are at our most vulnerable, and the association lingers. The first power-holders we meet—that is to say, our parents and other adult caretakers—teach us lessons about how to survive in the family that most of us never outgrow. We all come into adult relationships with childhood baggage—insecurities, habits, and comfort zones that draw us into old, familiar dramas where we can play old, familiar roles. The first brush with power leaves an indelible mark.

As an academic, I've written a lot about what having power might be like, and as a person, I've hoped against hope that becoming an expert and attaining stature in my field would help me feel more powerful and make it easier for me to be me. Yet having power, to the extent that I do, has not felt like I thought it would. Power attracts attention, and greater scrutiny. Higher expectations, and more ways to fail, with more at stake. Having power has done little to relieve me of my childhood insecurities. It has just provided a bigger stage on which to act them out.

Learning to Play the Professor

Becoming a professor was a fairly dramatic transition. I was a graduate student for five long years, so that role had become quite comfortable. I got my PhD and accepted a job at Northwestern University, and on my very first day, just like that, became “the professor.” I still felt like the same person, doing the same work—running experiments, publishing journal articles, and learning to teach—but to everyone else I was different. I was supposed to know things, to be the expert, to hold other people accountable and tell my students what to do.

It was the most uncomfortable of ironies. As a psychologist, I was a bona fide power expert. But I still felt powerless myself. I felt like an imposter, undeserving of the respect and attention that come with the role. And the more I advanced in my career, and the more my stature grew, the more I struggled to own who I was to other people. I could see how others looked in positions of power; I just couldn’t see myself as one of them.

Then I had a breakthrough. It came from an unexpected place. I was asked to take part in a new program being offered to business school faculty in an effort to increase teaching quality across the board. The program was offered by a consultant whose background was in the theater. It seemed a little woo-woo, even for California, but I agreed to participate because, true to form, I thought I had to.

I spent two full days in a claustrophobic lecture hall with eight other faculty members and a diminutive, supercharged woman named Barbara Lanebrown. She asked each of us to prepare three minutes of a typical lecture and deliver it to our colleagues. After the first presentation, she asked the speaker—a gray-haired expert in international business with a British accent—an unexpected question:

“Which characters,” she asked, “did you bring with you onto the stage?” He blinked at her, genuinely puzzled, until finally, one colleague, sensing his discomfort, asked Lanebrown to clarify. A classroom, she explained gently, “is like a theater, where we play the role of teacher.” Then she paused to let that sink in. “When we give a lecture,” she continued, “we are giving a performance. Like an actor, we make choices about how to play that role by enlisting characters that live within us who help us bring it to life.”

Some of us shifted and smiled weakly, and I thought I heard someone snort. I remember looking around to see if anyone was buying it. Then someone voiced what I was feeling: “I don’t act in the classroom. I’m just being myself.”

Lanebrown considered this comment. Then she asked us about the teaching presentation we’d just seen. Was this person, whom you know as a colleague but have never seen teach, different at all in the role of teacher? Did you see a side of him you hadn’t seen before, or learn anything about him that you weren’t aware of?

The answer, of course, was yes. “Onstage” he wasn’t exactly the same as the person we knew outside the classroom. As each person delivered their three-minute spiel, this proved to be true again and again. One guy, generally your typical buttoned-up academic, became more of “a stand-up comic.” Another normally easygoing and unusually friendly colleague became more stern, even a bit scary; he described himself, aptly, as “the sheriff.” A third, who was somewhat impulsive and feisty in faculty meetings, took on the quiet gravitas of “the village elder.” Every single one of us revealed a hidden side of ourselves when teaching. We each drew, however unconsciously, on characters we knew, who lived in us already, to give our best, or at least most comfortable, performance.

It was completely eye-opening. I learned that I brought an army of characters with me to deliver my lecture: the energetic one, the passionate one, the nervous one, the playful one, the vulnerable one,

the intellectual one, the knowledgeable one, the serious one, the articulate one, and the powerful one. Needless to say, not all were actually invited, but they made their appearances anyway, and apparently the stage wasn't big enough for the ten of us. I didn't really trust any of them, it turned out: I feared that the strong ones would be off-putting and the weak ones would be pitiful. The result was that they were all wrestling behind the curtain, and the audience could see it.

Each of us left the room that day with an assignment: to prepare another few minutes of lecture, but this time to try to commit to showing up in character more. We arrived on Day Two ready for a challenge. Some took bigger risks than others. The village elder came in slightly more rumped, with a folksier way of speaking. The sheriff wore cowboy boots and, on occasion, used his fingers as guns, to great effect. I can't recall what I tried to do, which is telling.

But what I do remember is that, unlike some of my colleagues, I couldn't stop self-censoring. And at the same time, I could see that when my colleagues were able to let go of being themselves and fully embrace the roles they were playing, their performances actually became more compelling, more engaging, more "true." Somehow, acting didn't make them seem less "authentic"; it actually made them appear more real.

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I now know that power is not personal, at least not in the way I once thought. In life, as in the theater, power comes with the roles we play. Actors, if they are successful, don't let their insecurities stop them from being who they need to be in order to do their jobs. To do any job well, to be the person you aspire to be, and to use power effectively (whether you feel powerful or not), you have to step away from your own drama and learn how to play your part in someone else's story.

I might feel unsure of myself as “the professor,” but that is, in fact, who I am. For me, acting as the professor is not “faking it”; it is accepting a shared social reality and committing to play my part.

We don’t always feel comfortable with the idea of ourselves as power-holders. But to use power well, we have to bring out the best part of ourselves at the right moments, while keeping the more insecure, less useful parts tucked away. Or, in the words of the great Judi Dench, “The trick is to take the work seriously, but not take yourself seriously at all.”

Being Cast as the Femme Fatale

In 2015, on the first day of classes, I found myself in the news. A tenured professor had been caught in a “love triangle” between her estranged husband and the dean of the Graduate School of Business, where all three of them happened to work. The story got a lot of attention. Reporters from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Businessweek*, among other outlets, had access to personal correspondence—the most personal kind you can imagine—between the dean and the professor, and were calling around for comment.

This was not a role I aspired to play. I was the butt of a joke: an expert on power and misconduct who was, according to initial reports, having “a secret affair” with her boss. Never mind the facts: that we were both single, that we had been dating for almost three years, and that the relationship was not a secret. Or that we had followed university policy, thinking that was enough. The fact that I was involved with “The Dean” changed the optics. The story of our relationship became high drama, with me cast as “the femme fatale.”

As an expert on power, you would think I might have seen it coming, and that I should have known how it might look. But before

the story broke, I still had an arm's-length relationship to power. I had studied it, thought about it, taught about it. Before that day, I had played with power, like a toy in a sandbox. Turned it over and pushed it around, to see how it worked. For my entire adult life, I had found power fascinating. But I couldn't see what it had to do with me.

The first big shock when the news broke was that anyone cared. In my mind, we were two private, newly single, middle-aged people who had found each other and were being given a second chance at love. Our world became very small. We spent a lot of time worrying about our kids and how they would handle our relationship. We did not think it would matter to anyone else. Of course, we were wrong. Our world felt small, but the stage we were standing on wasn't.

The femme-fatale thing blew over. Today I know I am not a caricature. And I know that although I can't control how other people see me, what other people say about me does not define who I am. Today I see myself as an actor would: as a person who is messier and more real. I am that character who tries her best but still makes mistakes, who is caring but also has needs, who is confident and yet has insecurities, who is powerful in some ways but powerless in others, and who takes her responsibilities seriously but plays her roles imperfectly.

In the theater, what it means to give a powerful performance is to accept and own the truth of what it means to be a human being: to be strong and weak, accomplished and fallible, powerful and powerless, all at once. This, actually, is the challenge that professional actors face every time they get in character. To play any part authentically, an actor must accept the character without judgment. And this is true for the rest of us as well. By accepting that each of us is all of these things, by learning to value all of these truths and show all of these sides of ourselves when appropriate, and by handling our

mistakes with grace and equanimity, we become more resilient, less ruled by shame and self-loathing, and, ultimately, more powerful. Ironically, this is where authenticity comes from: not trying to be more yourself, but learning to accept more of yourself.

For my part, I've come through the fire of my public embarrassment a much stronger person. I have witnessed that chilling deer-in-the-headlights look in strangers' eyes when they realize I'm the person they have read about. My response now is to focus on trying to make them more comfortable. Because I'm still doing what I love, trying to make myself useful, and playing the role that defines me as a person. And you know what? I'm not afraid of anything anymore. That, more than anything, is how I know that I have all the power I need.

We aren't always cast in the roles we desire, or in roles we feel prepared to play. But the show, as they say, must go on.

Becoming an Author

I am not the first writer to care about power. As a culture, we are obsessed with power—our own and everyone else's. There are a lot of books, and almost as many perspectives, on how to get more power. But for me, this approach misses the point. The one clear implication of all my research, and all my experience, both personal and professional, is that success, impact, and life satisfaction are not the result of how much power you can accumulate, or even how powerful others think you are; they are the result of what you are able to do for others with the power you already have.

This truth is unspoken in the current discourse on power, and the results are evident in every realm of social life. When we spend all of our time worrying about the power we don't have, we think of power as a resource for personal consumption and self-aggrandizement. We

define the acquisition of power as an end in itself. We buy into the myth that we all need more power to reach our goals in life, and that how much power we have defines our worth as human beings. We accept that we should strive to attain the highest possible position whatever it takes, and maintain the upper hand in every circumstance. The traditional take on power teaches us that the key to success is to attain more power, faster, by whatever means necessary, and that the person with more power wins.

These assumptions are not just wrong much of the time. It is far worse than that. The idea that we all need more power plays into our worst fears about ourselves and heightens our most destructive instincts. When power-holders feel more powerless than they are, when they are out of touch with the reality of their circumstances, when they fear they have less power than they do, they become self-protective and incapable of generosity. We all know what it means to use power badly; just take a look at the news: hate-spewing world leaders, corrupt politicians, unscrupulous CEOs, sexually aggressive entertainment moguls, wealthy parents who cheat their kids' way through the college admissions game—the list goes on. People who use the power they have to manage their own powerless feelings are bound to stray from their responsibilities. This is what it means to use power badly.

What is less obvious is what it means to use power well; this is much more mysterious. The key, I believe, is accepting the reality that more often than not, we have more power than we think we do. It is not so far-fetched. Power exists in every role, and in every relationship; it's a resource that flows between people who need one another. And because relationship partners, by definition, both need one another and have something to offer, power is almost never absolute. This means that all of us—regardless of who we are, how much we stand out, or how well we fit in, and despite how we feel—have power by virtue of the roles we play in others' lives. To use

power well, we need to think about power differently. We need to accept responsibility for the power we have. We need to take our roles and responsibilities more seriously than we do. That is why I'm writing this book.

The notion that we have more power than we think is probably disorienting. The idea that the roles and responsibilities that connect us to others might be a source of power, rather than just a source of weakness or constraint, sounds practically un-American, even to me. And the suggestion that looking out for number one might not lead most efficiently to the number one position probably sounds just plain wrong. But social science tells us that all of these things are true. It is not just personal agency, competitiveness, and a dog-eat-dog approach to social life that explains who attains the highest ranks in groups. To the contrary, research shows that across many species, individuals are rewarded with status (respect, admiration, and often more power) for using whatever strengths they have responsibly—by making themselves useful and solving group problems rather than just putting themselves first. There's nothing wrong with having personal ambitions or wanting to protect your own position. But we can also enhance our own standing in groups by caring, authentically, about those who are less powerful than we are. This is what it means to use power well.

This book seeks to correct common misconceptions about power: what it is, how it works, and how it affects every aspect of social life. It is informed by more than twenty years of scientific research on the psychology of power, and by my own experiences as both teacher and student in the classroom and elsewhere. It draws on the questions, stories, and wisdom of countless MBA students, executives, entrepreneurs, academics, professional actors, and leaders with whom I have talked, and from whom I have learned, about the true nature of power. And it distills the key lessons from an MBA course

that began as a quirky experiment and quickly became one of the most oversubscribed electives at the Stanford GSB. The course teaches that true, lasting power comes not from chasing personal stature or attaching ourselves to powerful others. It comes from learning to see power, and leadership, as opportunities to advance a shared plotline.

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Acting with Power is a book about power for anyone who has ever felt powerless, whether in a position of power or not. It's for anyone who has felt apprehensive about stepping into a bigger role, and for anyone who has felt stuck in a smaller one. It's for anyone who wants to act with confidence while feeling insecure, or to own a role while feeling like an imposter. It's for anyone who wields power often but feels they could do it better.

It is for everyone who struggles with how to use power differently while still being oneself—both those who struggle to step up and be taken more seriously, and those who struggle to stand back and be less intimidating; it's for those who are used to hearing they are too aggressive, and those who have been told they are too nice.

It's for those who want to understand why some people abuse their power, and want to learn how to resist, to survive—or better yet, come out stronger. It's for people who have made mistakes with their power in the past and who aspire to master their demons. And it's for leaders striving to create cultures and environments where power is used responsibly and where bullying, harassment, and other abuses of power are unlikely; where the people in leadership roles are the right people, cast for the right reasons and rewarded for the right actions: people who take the responsibility of being a role model to heart.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One exposes common myths about power and looks at how power actually works, and how it doesn't. It defines what it means to act with power, and what it means to do it well. In Part Two, we'll look at why roles matter in social and professional life, especially when it comes to power; how to figure out the role in which you've been cast; and how to play that role better, whether it feels natural to you or not. We'll look at how past roles follow us into new situations and why some of us seem able to use power only one way. To use power well, we need to master both command-and-control and respect-and-connect approaches. So in Part Two we'll look at how to expand your range: how to get comfortable with both commanding when your instinct is to connect, and respecting when your instinct is to control.

Part Three examines how to manage the insecurities—what actors think of as performance anxiety—that naturally arise when we step onto a larger stage. We'll look at the challenge of role transitions, why the ability to change roles is so important, and how an actor might approach internalizing a new role that feels unfamiliar, to avoid “losing the plot.” And we'll explain how it's possible to take roles seriously and still be yourself.

Part Four addresses abuses of power—like sexual aggression and bullying—and explains why they happen (it isn't always for the reasons you'd think). We'll look at how to avoid being cast as the victim or, inadvertently, as the villain; and how to avoid harming relationships in ways we do not intend. We'll look at how to play an active part in the drama that unfolds around us, rather than playing the bystander. Finally, we'll look at how power can be used at the top of an organization to create environments where abuses of power are less common than they currently seem to be.

Acting with Power is an approach to being powerful that places responsibility ahead of dominance, and maturity ahead of authenticity. It is a book about how to use power better by thinking less

about yourself and staying focused on your context. And if you are anything like me or the people I work with, I think you'll find that this approach to social life can change everything: not just your comfort with authority, the quality of your relationships, and your success and impact in all kinds of roles, but also the functioning of groups you are a part of. When individuals stay focused on collective outcomes, on elevating one another's performances, it creates psychological safety, enhances agility and flexibility, and minimizes status and power contests so that energy can be channeled toward group goals. And, at the risk of sounding grandiose, I believe that more people acting with power can benefit society as a whole. By learning how to use power better and on a larger scale, we are better equipped to prevent the abuses of power that can make all kinds of social institutions toxic.

Most books on power are about winning battles with other people. This one is about winning battles with ourselves.