



BOOK REVIEW

Deborah H. Gruenfeld (2020). *Acting with Power*. New York: Currency/Penguin Random House

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Deborah Gruenfeld is an American social psychologist from Stanford Graduate School of Business. In her latest book, *Acting with Power* (Gruenfeld, 2020), she shares insightful lessons, gathered from many years of research and teaching about power. The book attempts to hit a two-fold objective: (1) to free the readers from the misconceptions of power, and (2) to help them realize that they already possess power, through the various roles they play in life.

In the introduction, Gruenfeld recounts her early professional experiences. After she earned her PhD, she felt nothing had changed. She was immersed in the same routine of teaching, research, and experiments. However, to everyone else, she was different – someone who was supposed to be an expert. She felt an impostor. Things changed when she joined a faculty development program related to acting. In the book, Gruenfeld credits the program to understanding that “power comes from the role we play”. Successful actors do not let their insecurities hinder them from doing what they need. She emphasizes that actors “step away from their own drama and learn how to play a part in the story”. For Gruenfeld, acting as “the professor”, or any character, does not mean faking it. It has more to do with embracing the shared social reality and being committed to her part in the performance. Moreover, her research and experiences boil down to the conclusion that success and happiness are not a result of much power one can garner – they are the results of what one is able to do for other people with the power one has.

Gruenfeld offers a caveat that when an individual thinks much of the power they possess, they think of power as a resource and the end in itself. This makes people do whatever it takes to get a coveted position of power, regardless of the means. While many writers on power discuss winning battles with others, Gruenfeld claims that *Acting with Power* is about “winning battles with ourselves”. This eye-opening and captivating book has 10 chapters and is divided into four parts.

Part I “When the Curtain Goes Up” discusses the concept of power – meaning, myths, and truths. Power based on the prevalent definition refers to the capacity to control other individuals and the results of their actions. Power, thus, is distinct from status or authority – one can have power without them. Power and influence also differ from one another since influence is the outcome of power. Power is not a personal characteristic, too. In this book, power means playing a part in someone else’s story.

Power, as the author emphasizes, is based on relationships – what makes an individual powerful depends on how a person is needed. Power also is dependent on the context and is not permanent since one cannot retain power from one situation to another. In addition, Gruenfeld argues that power is a social contract. When a powerful person violates an implicit agreement, their power deteriorates. For example, an entrepreneur who exploits their workers unjustly will see themselves later as having no power because no one wants to work with them anymore.

Gruenfeld further explains that power comes from the people’s need to gain rewards and to avoid punishments, which are at the disposal of a certain individual. But power is not immediately observable; it has properties that are hidden. Knowledge is almost always a source of power, because what people know or do not know cannot be seen explicitly.

Part II “The Two Faces of Power” talks about the two typologies of power: (1) power up, and (2) power down, seasoned with various examples from history. Gruenfeld discusses power up by referring to Keith Johnstone, a British actor and theater director who pioneered improvisational theater (see Johnstone, 1987). In his terms, power up refers to playing high. It means raising oneself in comparison to others – by name-dropping, claiming expertise, or pulling rank; and by looking down at others such as through insulting someone, disagreeing with them, or brushing them off.

According to Johnstone (1987), power up gives off the message, “Don’t come near me, I bite”. In theater, as in life, playing power up takes up space, both in literal and figurative sense. A person who exemplifies power up does not have a hint of self-doubt, maximizes their comfort, speaks slowly and deliberately, and uses complete sentences. Such person does not offer an apology; they hold their head high and straight. Furthermore, manifesting power up can convey arrogance or pride, or it can communicate responsibility and compassion. It just depends on the timing, action, and situation.

On the other hand, playing power down invites connection and cooperation. A person intends to appear less threatening and less ruthless. Playing power down, both in acting and in life, involves avoidance of provoking others, speaking quickly but haltingly – uncertainty is also evident. A person builds trust and makes others feel comfortable. Playing power down does not imply surrendering power. It just shows respect. While playing power down can feel risky because others might think of it as a weakness, it actually can become an insignia of strength.

Part III “Taking the Stage” discloses how to manage insecurities, otherwise known as performance anxiety among actors; and how not to lose the plot when acting in life and in theater. Being oneself is a performance, according to Goffman (1956). Gruenfeld contends that acting is not faking – we are just wearing our roles. The author

suggests that we try to accept the reality of the stage we are on and to show a version of self that makes sense in this situation. We should stick to the storyline, though, which means that we should remain linked to the common realities. If we lose the plot, because we are too immersed in ourselves and our insecurities, we lose the track of our roles and responsibilities. This, in turn, can lead us to serious consequences like damaged relationships, lost reputation, or even criminal charges.

Gruenfeld proposes, therefore, that when we take on a role, we need to set aside our personal frustrations and craving for power. First, we need to ground ourselves with the context and understand who we are to the people in that certain situation and comprehend the impact that we can make we need to concentrate more on the work we do than on how we look or feel as we do it. The author summarizes that acting enables us to step beyond traditional self-views and open up to new forms of thinking and being.

Part IV “Understanding Abuses of Power, and How to Stop Them” describes various types of abusive characters and advises on how to deal with abusive situations. People seek power for a variety of reasons. Based on research, strong power motive predicts effective leadership according to many studies (e.g., Magee & Langner, 2008; Winter & Barenbaum, 1985). However, Gruenfeld warns that when people see power as the end in itself, it leads to abuses and corruption because they want to be perceived as powerful but do not commit to a task they are in charge of. Moreover, according to the author, the effects of power include: (1) disinhibition, people act more readily on almost all kinds of impulses; (2) objectification, treating humans as objects to attain personal aims; and (3) entitlement, thinking that they deserve the things they want just because they want them. Gruenfeld further elaborates on the types of abusive characters and the ways of dealing with them.

Overall, I find the book powerful, compelling but accessible to wide audience due to lively examples, narratives and historical scenarios which illustrate the ideas. In addition, the author has the strong message, and I would recommend this book to those who want not only to understand power but to empower themselves.

References

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