

How to talk about power

A practical framework for understanding social power

Overview

What this is about

- Social power drives and shapes human activity, from individual interactions to social, economic and political systems.
- At the same time, there is a strong cultural inhibition, or taboo, against talking about social power.
- This taboo can contribute, at every scale, to misalignment of goals and action, reduced organizational productivity, misallocation of resources, and underuse of human capability.
- The taboo is reinforced by the fact that social power is complicated and difficult to talk about.
- This document provides a framework of how social power exists and operates.
- The purpose of this framework is to support a widespread capability to talk about power, thus helping overcome the taboo and leading to a broader and more effective use of social power.
- Power exists within a larger field of social dynamics, including particularly caring. Power can enable caring to become effective, but it can also override or damage caring. Understanding that relationship is one reason to understand power.

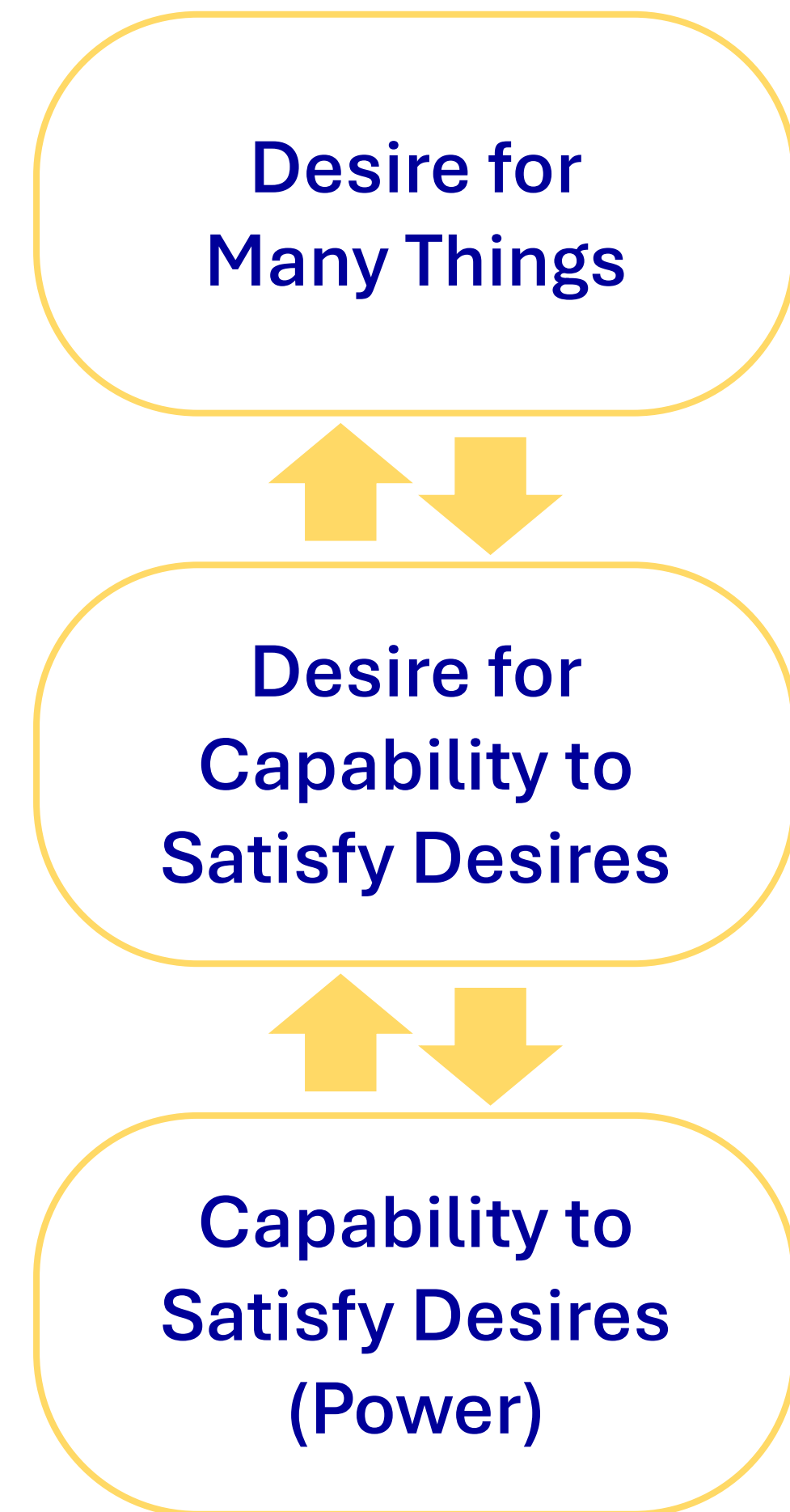
Why does power matter?

Power is *usually* not the thing we ultimately want.

We want things: security, freedom, achievement, influence, connection, comfort, change.

Getting those things requires *capability*.

The basis of power is capability in relation to what we want.



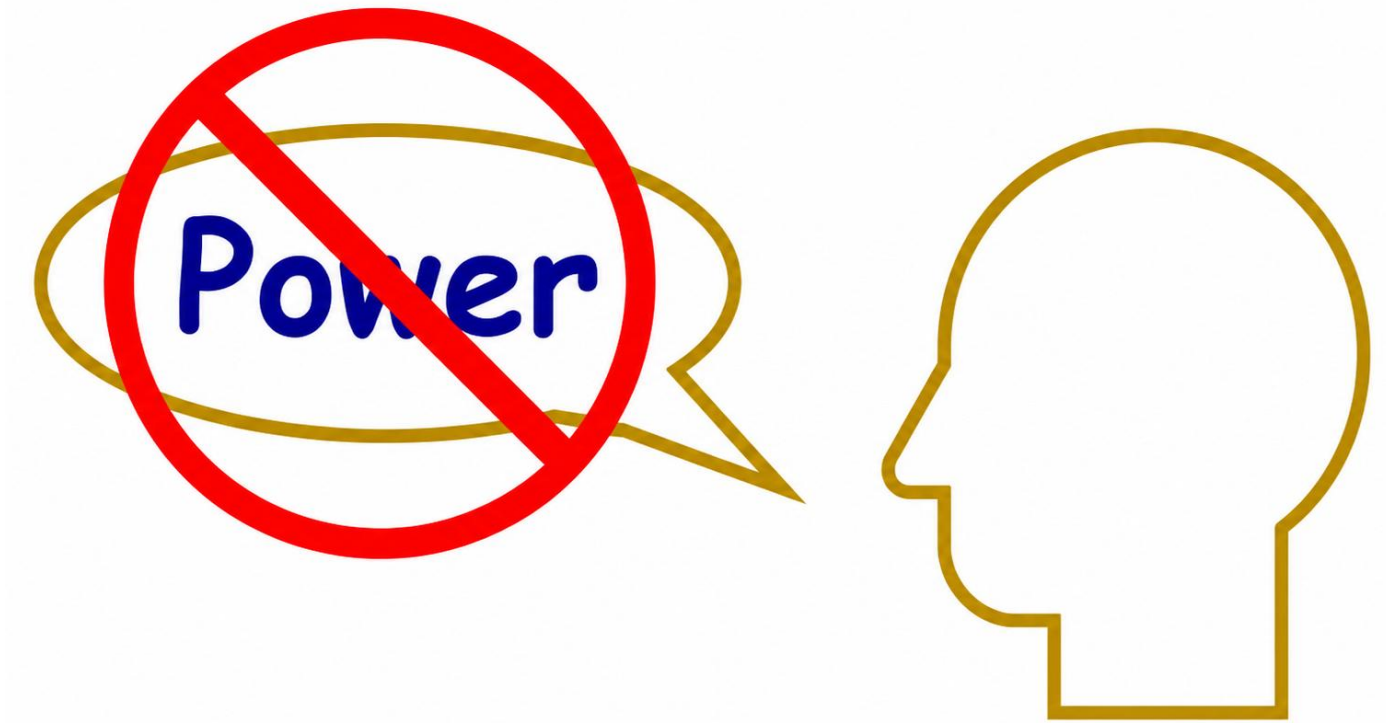
Overview and evidence of the taboo

A “taboo” is a social rule and function that supports avoidance of a particular topic, in this case power.

Does the taboo exist?

- Power is operating everywhere, but direct conversations about it are relatively uncommon.
- Power is often a sensitive, loaded topic.
- People with power speak more frequently in terms of ideas, values and policies.
- The test: imagine any social situation, and saying, *“Let’s talk about the power dynamics here.”*

What is your reaction to that thought?



Basic elements of power

Capability (Objective)

- Skills
- Knowledge
- Resources
- Network

Making things happen

Status (Social)

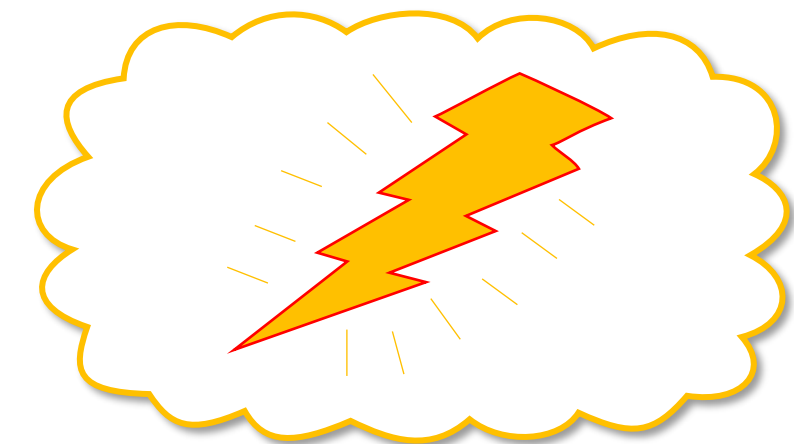
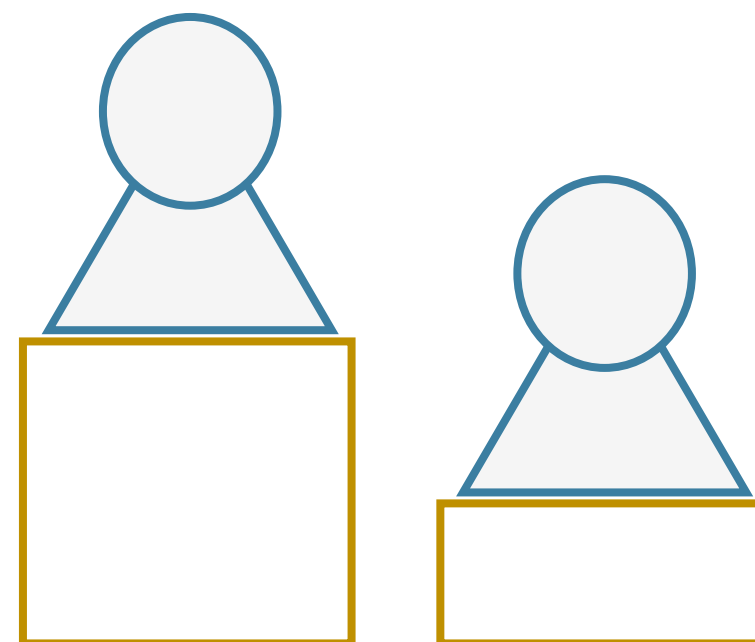
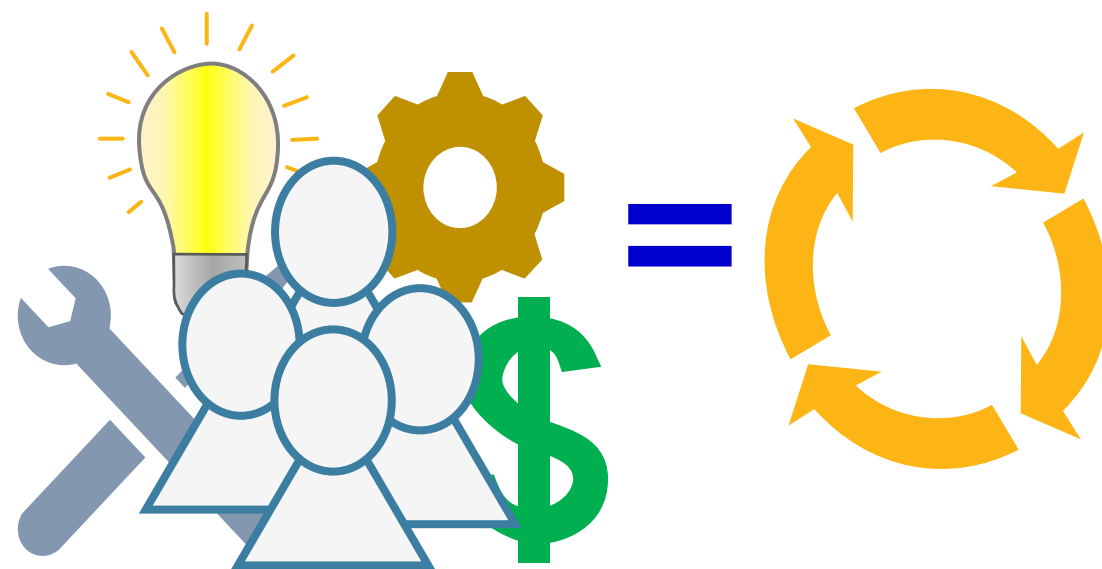
- Reputation
- Titles
- Prestige
- Rank

Relating to people

Sense of Power (Personal)

- Energy
- Confidence
- Ideas
- Intent

Feeling you can do it



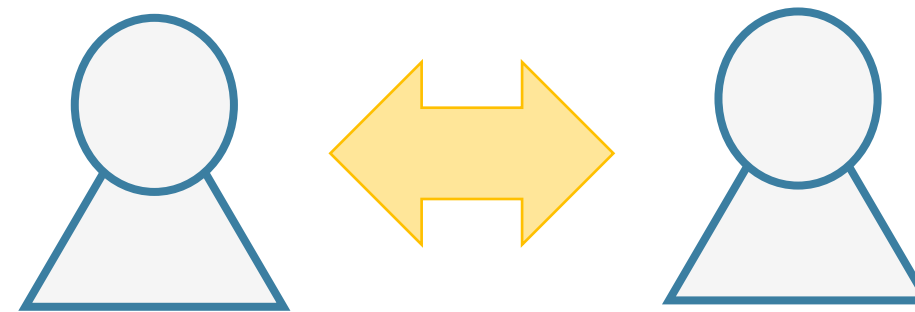
Power operates in three major domains of activity

Individual



Power in what a person can do, experience, and choose.

Relationship



Power in relationships and interactions between people.

Group



Power through groups, organizations, communities, and other social systems.

Power operates through interacting components and areas of activity

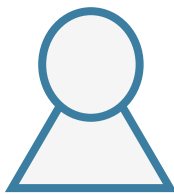
Components ➡ Areas of Activity ⬇	Capability	Status	Sense of Power
Individual	This framework gives us a way to locate and describe what is happening with power.		
Relationship			
Group			

Power is situational and relational: it changes with the people, setting, relationships and capabilities involved.

Capability comes from many places

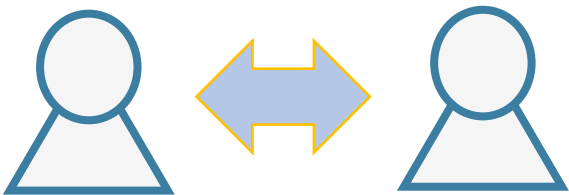
Strength & energy	Skills	Knowledge	Tools	Resources	Networks	Organization
Physical capacity Endurance Health	Learned abilities Craft Technique	Information Insight Experience	Technology Equipment Methods	Money Materials Property Time	Contacts Ties Access	Ability to coordinate all other capabilities

Individual



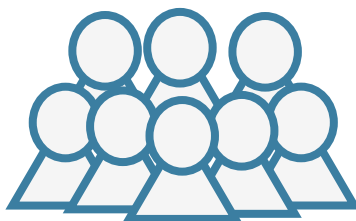
What a person can do

Relationship



What people can do through relationships

Group



What people can do through organized collective action

“This is what allows me to do things and create effects I want.”

What is status?

Status is perceived relative social standing.

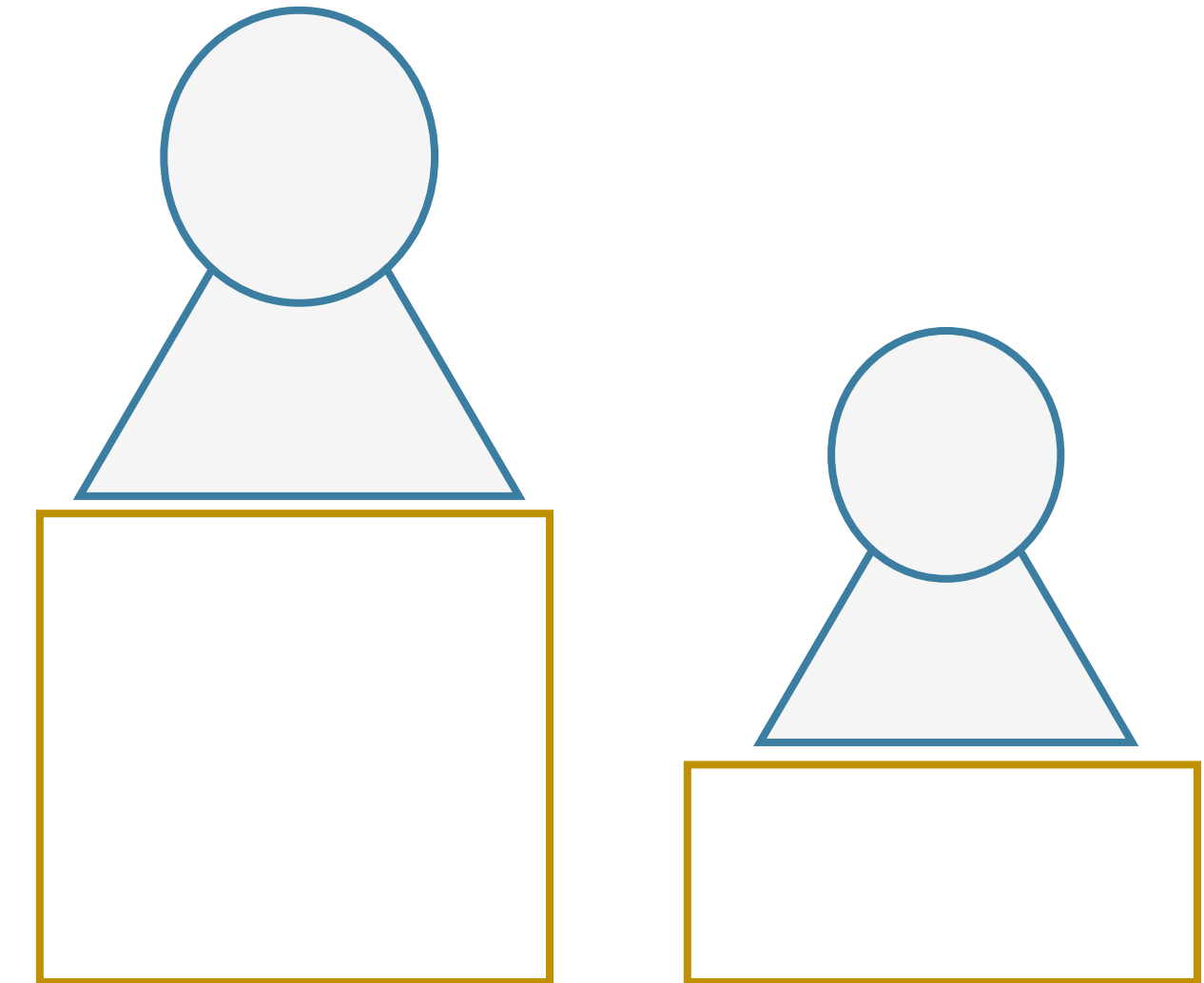
It reflects how we evaluate ourselves and how we are evaluated by others.

Status evaluations can be based on many things:

- Capability • Wealth • Role • Reputation
- Gender • Age • Race • Religion
- Appearance • Connections • Culture

What counts and how much it counts varies across people, groups and cultures.

Much of this can be tacit, automatic and outside conscious awareness.



Sense of power involves a perception of feeling

Before looking more closely at sense of power, here are some familiar experiences we're going to group under the heading of Feeling.

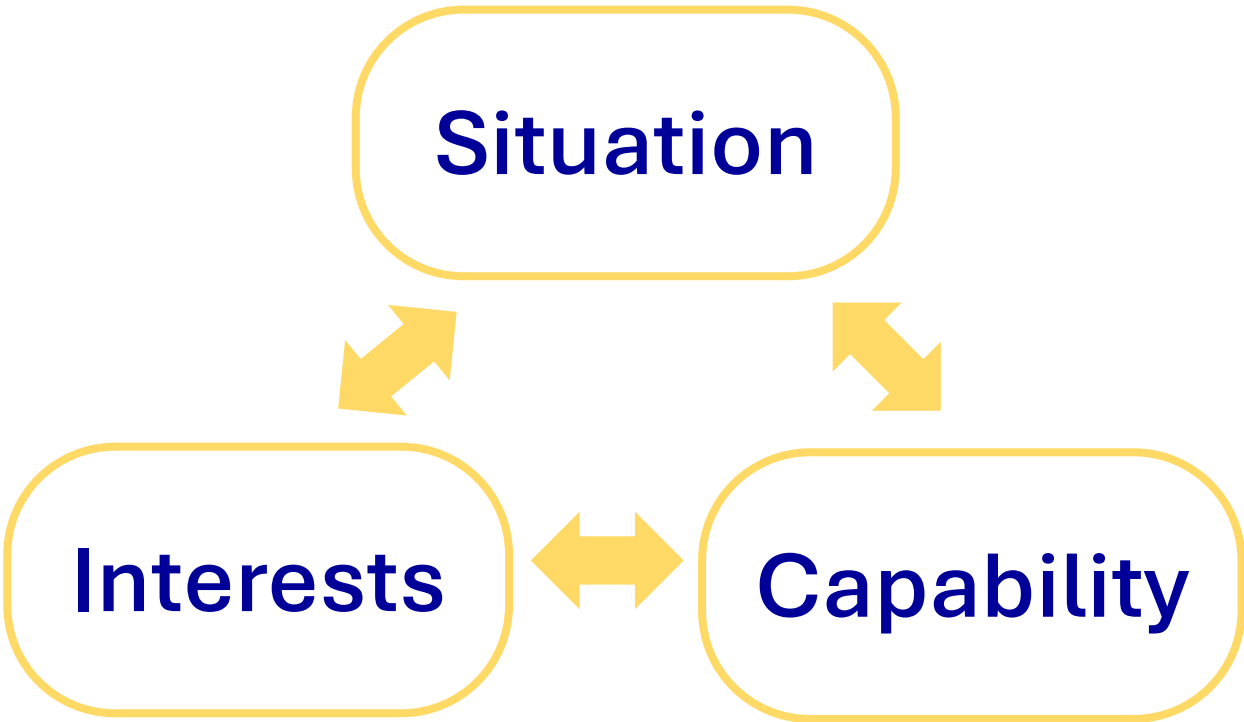
Feeling

Felt Evaluation	Values & Interests	Emotion	Performance States
What draws us toward or pushes us away Bodily felt evaluation of positive, neutral and negative	What matters to us Often learned from the people around us	Joy, anger, fear, grief, happiness, pride: the whole range Often about relationships	Physical and mental readiness, energy, inhibition and so on Examples: how athletes, dancers and chess players prepare

Sense of power draws on these experiences to tell us something about our relationship to the situation we are in.

Our sense of power answers *two questions*

Both questions are about the relationships among our *situation, our capability, and our interests*



“Based on my perception and beliefs about what is happening, immediate, short term, and long term:

“Can I handle the situation I’m in?”

Feelings: Confident ↔ Okay ↔ Anxious

“Are my interests being fulfilled or thwarted?”

Feelings: Joy / Elation ↔ Satisfied ↔ Anger / Deflation

Uses of the Framework

Interpret power psychology and dynamics

See Capability, Status and Sense of Power separately and in combination.

Develop personal power

Identify what may be limiting or what can increase effective action.

Recognize manipulation and abuse

Recognize when power is being used for someone's benefit at someone else's expense.

Understand systems, groups and organizations

See where power comes from, how it is distributed, and how people experience it.

Improve interactions

Identify and respond to power dynamics as they arise in conversations and meetings.

Increase awareness and choice

Make previously undeclared power processes easier to work with.

The model doesn't tell us what to do with power. It can help us see more clearly what is happening and give us more choice about how to respond.