

# Academic teachers under the influence of power

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**Abstract**—38 narratives where academic teachers describe interactions with a formal leader in matters related to teaching have been analysed. The analysis, which is supported by a theoretical framework on power, reveals that power is experienced *both* as positive and as negative. Ideas for further research on power in higher education are discussed.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pressure is placed on academic teachers to produce value for their students, for the knowledge society, for the institution, and for the benefit of economic growth. This entails an intensified use of management and therefore of power in the higher education organisations [1]. This is a call for research on power in higher education of today.

So far, such research has investigated what the recent development has done to professional identities [2], to traditional conceptions like collegiality [3; 4], and to academic leadership. In the latter, heads of departments, program coordinators, and deans are often surveyed about their experiences of leading academic teachers [5]. Much less interest have been directed towards teachers and their experiences of leadership, management, and power [6]. This paper compensates for this.

The paper starts by establishing a perspective on power and continues by examining how power emerges in the narratives. The purpose is to describe power as experienced by academic teachers, but also to investigate whether power in higher education is experienced as positive or negative.

## II. POWER

### A. A basic perspective

In daily conversations, power often means *power over* someone, that is, domination [7], x forces y to act according to his or her will. Biesta [8] relates this to the basic human capacity of reducing complexity and thereby making action possible in a world of infinite complexity. When complexity is reduced in *one specific* way; it follows that all other possible actions were not chosen. An action is a result of an individual's specific way to reduce complexity. Domination therefore, according to Biesta [8] can be described as a process where x reduces complexity *for* y and thereby prescribes y's actions.

Total domination exists when x prescribes completely for y how complexity should be reduced without considering y's interpretations, opinions, or needs. In such a situation, y has

been totally stripped of integrity. He or she is, so to speak, no longer a person [9]. Even though this has been a reality throughout history, it is hardly relevant in today's higher education. However, as we shall see, nuances of such total domination do indeed emerge in the material.

### B. Three conceptions of power

Following this perspective, Dean [10] suggests three conceptions of domination, which according to him are highly relevant in modern leadership, management, and governmentality. The three conceptions are summarised below and later they are used to scaffold the analysis of the 38 narratives provided by academic teachers.

1) The first conception is based on *quantity*. One party has more power than the other. Interaction is initially conflictual. After having established the hierarchy, one party signals subordination to the winning party and thereby co-constructs the power-relationship. This may generate positive experiences for the subordinate. As long as he or she displays loyalty towards the dominator's way of defining the reality (dominator's way of reducing complexity), he or she gains access to protection, guidance, and resources provided by the dominator.

2) In the second conception, power is afforded by *rules*, that is, x may dominate y because rules say so. Because of this link to rules, power becomes less tangible for those involved. The reason for this is that rules are often established somewhere else. For example, when the dominator says: "Sorry, I really sympathise with you, but you see, according to the rules [formulated somewhere else] you cannot do this, or you have to do this." Both parties can in fact be perceived as being dominated by the same rules, even though one party is often afforded power since he or she has the privilege to interpret the rules. Consequently, the subordinate is dominated through two simultaneous interactions: (1) with the rules often formulated somewhere else sometimes by individuals unknown to him or her and (2) with a person who owns the privilege to interpret the rules.

3) In the third conception domination is accomplished by controlling how the subordinate *perceives the reality*. Subordinates may experience themselves as controlled by free will and rational deliberation. From the dominator's perspective, however, the reality inhabited by subordinates is fixed; it is *designed* so that the subordinates perceive certain actions as more rational than others. The subordinates are dominated without experience domination.

In the following, the basic principle of power as complexity-reduction and the three conceptions of power introduced by Dean will be used in an analysis of 38 narratives describing how academic teachers experience interactions with formal leaders in higher education.

C. *Focused questions are:*

- How do experiences of power and domination emerge through the narratives?
- Are these experiences viewed as negative or positive?
- How do the experiences relate to the three conceptions provided by Dean?
- Is power as complexity-reduction a useful perspective when studying the experience of power in higher education?

III. METHOD

A. *Sample*

Narratives were collected from academic teachers through the instruction: "You are asked to write about a situation in which you had a direct encounter with a formal leader in a matter related to teaching and learning in higher education. That experience may be positive or negative. There is no specific length or kind of experience, so please select one to reflect on." In addition, the narrators were instructed to provide a brief context, a description of what happened, what they felt, and what they now think about the situation. Narratives were almost entirely collected through email. (A few exceptions meant that the narrators were interviewed and the narratives written down as a result of the interview.) The narratives varied in length from a few lines to several pages.

The narrators were all active as academic teachers in universities in six countries, representing four continents. They were approached in different ways. Their respective experience of being an academic teacher varied in length; some worked at research-intensive institutions while others was active in teaching-only institutions. Despite these variations, they all shared the experience of being trained as academics and of being teachers in academic contexts. The leaders they portrayed in the narratives were heads of departments, program coordinators, deans, or any other leader, such as a professor in the discipline.

B. *Narrative inquiry*

Within the context of qualitative methodology, narrative inquiry is seen as particularly appropriate in researching how people make sense of their lives by selecting and arranging information about noteworthy episodes [11]. Narratives "not only pass on information" but they also "crystallize or define an issue, view, stance or perspective" [12, p 553]. More than mere data, narratives package experience as stories with an attached personal meaning [13]. Pitfalls linked to narrative inquiry originate from the fact that the narrator uses only his or her perspective. This narrows the perspective and often fails to uncover causes for actions other than those perceived by the narrator. Furthermore, narratives seldom problematize the perspective of the narrator [14]. Therefore, narrative inquiry often produces rich data and communicates the narrator's personal meaning and interpretations. However, it is likely that the situations described would appear different if the narrative were collected from the other end of the interaction.

In this particular project, the narratives are searched for aspects of power and domination revealed in the specific interaction described by the narrators. It is assumed that the narratives do contain enough material for an analysis of

power. Further problematization is linked to the theoretical perspective introduced above.

IV. FINDINGS

Thirty-eight narratives all written in English were collected from seven universities in six countries across four continents. The length varied from a few lines up to six pages. 20 narratives described negative experiences, 16 positive, and two neutral [15]. In short, the narratives varied from extremely negative experiences obviously leaving scars in memories, sometimes for decades, to extremely positive experiences with lifelong developmental effects.

A. *Descriptive analysis*

The material is presented below as excerpts from six narratives representing the breadth of the material. The six excerpts are first presented in detail and are subsequently arranged in relation to Dean's [10] three conceptions.

*Excerpt 1.*

*"My narrative begins by recounting an event from one of the first meetings I attended in my new department. [A colleague presented impressions from a teaching and learning conference.] During his presentation, he twice mentioned this: conference speakers had stressed that it was important to set high expectations for students; moreover, it was held, students responded well to high expectations. /---/*

*The others cast their eyes down and attendees began to look afraid. At the second utterance, he also looked as if he were about to be sent to the guillotine. This puzzled me. I looked at the head of the department. She styled herself as a promoter of innovative education, and she was staring at the speaker with a look of fury. Her lips curled and she glared at him. It was not a hot glare but a cold glare. The phrase 'glacial disdain' came to mind. I could tell that she knew everyone else was very nervous and that she wanted him and others to know that this was a forbidden topic. When he finished, she said that she would re-consider for the future whether people would be permitted to share conference highlights without checking with her in advance on what was to be shared. The whole room full of 23 adults, most late middle-aged looked like frightened, chastened children. They all quickly scurried from the room and hid in their offices.*

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*Censorship and totalitarianism, toadyism and purges were the norms for a few years.*

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*I found that we followers were also responsible for regressing to child-like, spineless, even terrified drones." (Narrator 7, negative)*

*Excerpt 2.*

*"The school, a professional one, had not yet been accredited since the program was too new, but the intention was to have it accredited by the time the first class graduated – a huge undertaking. /---/ A major player in all this was the dean and more directly the department chair. This chair was an outstanding teacher who made the most complex both understandable and extremely interesting. I was expected to teach content she had formerly taught while she moved into upper division courses. It was my relationship with this department chair that solidified my*

*love for working with students and teaching in a university program. She led by directly assisting and by example. Always prepared for meetings within the school and university, the agenda was clear and followed, her contributions well referenced and presented. Objectively and careful listening were consistently evidenced. /---/ She helped me in the same way – opening her classes to me to observe when I was not otherwise engaged, answering question, sitting in on my classes for support, not evaluating. /---/She asked my opinions and assessment and trusted my input.*

*Now, I see this former department chair as one of the most important influences in my adult life. She remains an inspiration during good teaching times and bad.” (Narrator 22, positive)*

As is illustrated, power has a strong effect on the narrator. Power is also relational since the parties involved co-construct the situation where power and domination is established. It is also clear that the experience of power in higher education can be both negative and positive.

Since the narratives describe series of events it becomes clear that power and domination always have a history; they are constructed as a continuation of previous events.

*Excerpt 3 (positive).*

*“The two [previous] leaders socialised with some staff outside business hours and these conversations also became part of the corridor talk audible to other staff. /---/ Some staff were praised frequently in staff meetings for the work they did, whilst other were not. /---/ The workplace climate has some toxic undercurrents.*

*The [new] leader’s dialogue consistently focused on doing business well. /---/ The leader relocated office into the shared workspace where the corridor gossip had become par of (sic) the course for quite some time prior to the new leader’s arrival. The gossip stopped immediately when the leader relocated. This leader was task focused, knowledgeable and able to share inclusive visions for making quality improvements. The leader distributed high expectations more equally amongst staff than had been the case previously with the other two leaders. /---/ The impact this change had on me was one of relief, and of slow return of enjoyment in doing my work without paranoia about office politics.*

*The treatment from previous leaders evoked personal feelings of distrust and shame /---/ The new leader leads by example. There are no bells or whistles, but rather a collegial approach to continuous improvement to our courses and settings.” (narrator 21, positive)*

In this narrative, it is clear that the method enforces the narrator’s interpretations of events. We learn nothing about possible historic rivalry between members of the office at hand, or any other potential causes of the initially negative situation. Instead the situation is interpreted by the narrator. Narratives are thus always edited material; they are dramaturgically designed. Future research on power can enrich the result by collecting narratives from both sides in the situation and comparing them.

Nevertheless, the narratives confirm the overall perspective suggested in the theory section, namely that domination can be described as a process where someone reduces complexity for someone else. In excerpt 1, power, as it was exercised by the dominator influenced what was possible to say by those present. In excerpts 2 and 3 the narrators experience that productive actions become possible thanks to the ways in which power was exercised. In excerpt 2, the narrator experienced personal growth and in excerpt 3 a destructive situation was transformed into one where constructive action became possible.

In excerpt 4 (below), formal leaders seek to change the narrator’s interpretation of a situation.

*Excerpt 4.*

*“I caught a student outright plagiarizing an essay by cutting and pasting material from the web. /---/ I called the student into my office, and he was adamant that it was not cheating and he had done nothing wrong. I gave him zero on the assignment, as per my course outline. /---/*

*The following week our VP (academic) [came] to my office to talk. It turned out that the students’ father was a well-known person in the town and knew the VP. He had called the VP to ask him to deal with the situation. The VP assured me that he was not reprimanding me and was only trying to clarify what had happened. But he also told me that this was a graduate student. /---/ I responded that I did not feel that this was any reason to ‘forgive’ plagiarism; on the contrary.... /---/ When I showed the VP the evidence, he agreed with me that it was indeed plagiarism and said he would tell the father so.*

*At the time it did not occur to me that the VP’s visit was totally inappropriate, since he tried to make it ‘informal’. A personal visit from the VP over such matter is never really informal.*

*In the event, the student did appeal, and shortly thereafter my department Chair asked me if I would take a walk with him to discuss the matter. He tried very hard to persuade me to drop the matter. /---/ I felt my academic integrity was at stake. /---/ I felt pressured, not only by his attempt to persuade me to say I had been wrong, but also by the fact that this conversation took place on a walk around the campus, not in my office or his, suggesting that it was just something to sweep under the carpet, not to be considered a ‘formal’ talk, but merely informal ‘suggestion’. In the end the department Chair decided to deny the appeal /---/ he email me /---/ he realized that I was right.*

*The incident has haunted me for more than ten years. /---/ I still feel slightly sick when I think about the situation.” (narrator 15, negative)*

As already pointed out, domination entails a relationship where the receiving end often becomes involved personally. In excerpts 1 and 2, above, the dominated part co-constructed the situation. In excerpt 4 on the other hand, the attempt to dominate is resisted, but even though the resistance was successful it did not protect the narrator from being affected negatively. Instead, the situation lingers on as a scar. Thus, experiences of power may cause strong

reactions and are thereby likely to influence the individuals involved in the future.

However, this is not a general rule. Other narratives describe situations of power and domination in a more tranquil way.

*Excerpt 5.*

*"I needed to turn in some data to the department chair regarding some assessment data my first year teaching. I was a bit overwhelmed by the idea, having had no prior experience in this arena. My department chair took me through a step by step process of writing a rubric to help me gather the information needed to report to the larger faculty. The students responded in a very positive manner having been given specific expectations. I was grateful for the guidance and continue to be so." (narrator 23, positive)*

*Excerpt 6.*

*"I have been 'observed' a couple of times by my supervisor. Since my supervisor has had limited teaching experience, has never taught full-time, and has limited teaching pedagogy, having feedback is always 'interesting'.*

*For instance, this last time I taught a four-hour class. My supervisor observed for about an hour, and then left. When we had the observation review, my supervisor not only neglected to bring any notes taken during observation, we also got together nearly eight weeks later. We talked about the observation for about ten minutes, with most of it being me, and what I did after the supervisor left.*

*Because of situations like this, I do not give this individual much credit for knowledge or expertise in anything teaching or learning related. It also seems that because of the ego of this individual, having someone else come in (i.e. delegating the observation) would be more developmental for me. Unfortunately, this is not done, because as I understand it only deans can do the observation." (narrator 24, negative)*

Both these narratives indicate that power and domination can be less emotional.

*B. The material through Dean's conceptions.*

The narratives illustrate well the three conceptions of power provided by Dean [10] (Table 1.). The initial analysis show that power and domination in higher education is established in interactions where one party is more forceful than the other and where the subordinate through his or her actions contributes to the maintenance of the power-relation. But dominations can also be established through a privilege to interpret rules. Lastly, domination is established through rearrangement of reality where the subordinate is influenced to interpret the reality in certain ways.

## V. DISCUSSION

Before entering a discussion about the results, it is important to stress that the narratives are bound to the present. Therefore they do not permit comparison with the past or predictions for the future. What this method allows us to see are experiences formulated by individuals in the way they choose to tell them. Narratives are also personal and restricted accordingly. Moreover, since the narrators are prompted with an open invitation emotionally charged situations will most likely be overrepresented in the

material. It is therefore likely that the material provides less insight in a regular everyday leadership where power is hardly recognised; a kind of leadership and use of power that might constitute general state of affairs.

Nevertheless, the material offers insight in how power can be experienced by academic teachers. Power is definitely doing things to them; but can be experienced as *both* a negative and a positive force. Many of the narratives describe how power result in positive experiences of personal growth or constructive handling of difficult situations. On the other hand, situations that leave scars for years to come are also described, as illustrated in excerpt 4: *"The incident has haunted me for more than ten years."*

The results calls for a wider acceptance that power and the dominations it entails can, under certain conditions have a tremendously positive effects in higher education; a fact with potential implications for discussions about academic freedom. The material illustrates that being dominated is not always contradictory to academic freedom.

Some additional observations emerge in the material: We can see clear traces of power and experiences of domination through the three conceptions suggested by Dean. There are situations in the material where domination is established through processes where the subordinates accept their position and thereby co-constructs the situation as positive or negative. Reason for why this happens may vary. We also see interactions governed by rules established somewhere else and that one party in the interaction has the privilege and competence to interpret these rules and thereby is afforded power. Lastly, we can see how dominations is linked to establishment of or attempt to establish a worldview where the subordinate are likely, through rational deliberation to chose a certain by the dominator intended behaviour.

It would be interesting to see whether one of these three versions of domination increases over time in higher education. Perhaps the power and domination through rules have increased due to increased bureaucratisation. But it can also be argued that the discourse of economification has gained momentum and thereby encapsulated academic teachers in a certain worldview. Further research is needed.

Power and domination appears in the material as sometimes contradictory to and sometimes aligned with academic freedom. Sometimes academic teachers actively choose subordination. Power and domination is established in various ways. The above calls for further research focusing on the nature and the effects emerging from power and domination.

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Conceptions of domination	Positive experience	Negative experience
1. Domination, where the subordinate signals surrender and thereby co-construct the situation	<p>From excerpt 2: "She led by directly assisting and by example. /---/ I see this former department chair as one of the most important influences in my adult life." (22)</p> <p>Interpretation: The dominator's reduction of complexity is mediated through a personal relationship, resulting in an experience of professional and personal growth.</p>	<p>From excerpt 1: "The phrase 'glacial disdain' came to mind. /---/ Censorship and totalitarianism, toadyism and purges were the norms for a few years." (7)</p> <p>Interpretation: The dominator reduces complexity and the subordinates experience no opportunity to engage. Open conflict would be the only option provided, if they want to dispute the dominators view. They avoid this and thereby they co-construct the situation.</p>
2. Dominations through rules.	<p>From excerpt 5: "I needed to turn in some data to the department chair regarding some assessment data my first year teaching. My department chair took me through a step-by-step process of writing a rubric to help me gather the information needed to report to the larger faculty. I was grateful for the guidance and continue to be so." (23)</p> <p>Interpretation: Complexity is reduced through interpretation by the chair who knows the rules. Subordinate recognise the value in what is achieved.</p>	<p>From excerpt 6: "having someone else come in would be more developmental for me. Unfortunately, this is not done, /---/ 'only deans can do the observation'" (24)</p> <p>Interpretation: Complexity is reduced by a set of rules that are taken for granted. The power relationship is experienced as meaningless but impossible to refute.</p>
3. The establishment of domination and subordination includes rearrangement of the reality or the worldview.	<p>From excerpt 3: "The treatment from previous leaders evoked personal feelings of distrust and shame /---/ The new leader leads by example. There are no bells or whistles, but rather a collegial approach to continuous improvement to our courses and settings." (21)</p> <p>Interpretation: A new worldview is established through the use of power. Reality is experienced as meaningful and is linked to a sense of direction.</p>	<p>From excerpt 4: "In the event, the student did appeal, and shortly thereafter my department Chair asked me if I would take a walk with him to discuss the matter. He tried very hard to persuade me to drop the matter. /---/ I felt my academic integrity was at stake." (15)</p> <p>Interpretation: The party in power tries to present reality in a specific way through small talk. The attempt is supported through a shift of location distancing the interaction from the traditional ways of doing things. Reality is presented in a specific way, aimed at shifting the narrator's rational view.</p>

Table 1. Power is described as positive and negative and different in nature, following Dean.

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