



Philanthropic Foundations and the Exercise of Power

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The inherent inequalities in the relationship between grant making foundations and beneficiaries are widely discussed across disciplines and research communities. However, some forms of power receive more attention than others — either because they are more visible in practice or because of their broader societal impact.

Are there forms of power that remain unexplored in the foundation context?

To address this question, the authors assessed a wider range of papers that discuss these experiences of power in the grant making foundation context. They analyse this literature through the lens of the “four faces of power” framework. This framework distinguishes between episodic forms of power — *coercion* and *manipulation* — and systemic forms of power — *domination* and *subjectification*. They additionally propose another face of power that is, they argue, vital to the ever-complex sociopolitical geopolitical climate: power through interorganisational networks.

[#Power](#) [#Foundations](#) [#Philanthropy](#) [#Grant-making](#)

Background

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Context



- Concerns about inequalities in foundation–beneficiary relationships have existed since the early days of foundations. In the past, there were government oversight committees in the US. Now, there is the registration and reporting of charities – 501 (c)3 or charity commission – but there is also **reduced government capacity to oversee the outsized and unmonitored power that large-scale funders exert in society.**
- This influence allows foundations to impose their definition of proper affairs on the world. Drawing on organisational power theories to assess societal power centres, foundations can be understood as a vehicle of societal ideologies. In this context, the authors assess **foundation staff, board and donors as actors in elite positions allowing them to influence issues.**
- They use **Fleming and Spicer’s ‘Faces of Power’ framework** to explore episodic power (identifiable acts) and systemic power (mobilisation of institutions and ideologies to influence activity). Examples of how these forms of power appear in foundations are illustrated in the diagram on the next page.
- They analysed and coded **219 peer reviewed journal articles** on foundations. The **most frequently used term (30%) was influence.** Applying the framework, the authors examine how power operates within, through, over, and against organisations.

ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



Foundation faces of power (based on Fleming and Spicer Framework)



- The spread of which faces of power were addressed speaks to their occurrence. **A quarter of articles tackled coercion**, a comply or face consequences approach. Another **34% tackled manipulation**, (also referred to as agenda-setting), meaning the ability to shape what is considered important or acceptable.
- The systemic faces are often more opaque. Yet **two thirds of the articles focused on domination**; where an imposed hierarchy becomes inevitable and values and ideas become homogenic. The final form, **subjectification, was only addressed in 6% of articles**, likely because it is difficult to assess. It refers to shaping individuals' sense of self or identity — the subtle, often invisible alteration of consciousness.
- The authors propose a **fifth site of power: power-with**, where foundations collaborate with grantees to pursue shared goals and strengthen outcomes.
- The article also highlights the growing influence of **interorganizational networks**, where foundations collaborate with other funders, governments, and civil society actors to shape agendas and coordinate strategies.
- Within the articles analysed, there is a **representation of the outsized power of the “Big Five” foundations**: Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford, Gates and Soros (present in 35% of articles). This alone illustrates their power and influence.
- It is worth noting that this piece **focused on articles only in English**, which may limit its global perspective and place disproportionate emphasis on US foundations. **Other cultural contexts might reveal different dynamics or additional forms of power.**
- Overall, the article **highlights gaps in foundation research and calls for further study** - both to strengthen foundation theory and to contribute more broadly to theories of power.

Form of Power		Episodic (acts)		Systemic (influence)		*New fifth face*
		Coercion	Manipulation	Domination	Subjectification	Power with
Foundation	In	Control of expertise and resources	Deciding which issue are important	Normative climate – people accept their subordination	Shape worker identity while they espouse autonomy	Power with each other – more research needed
	Through	Control through possession of resources	Influences others' decision making	Shape the norms – ideological homogeny	Shaping the identity of actors through the everyday	
External impact	Over	Ideas come from the top execs	Agenda controlled by external actors	Legitimacy of actions determined by external actors	Redefining the meaning of work by foundation actors	
	Against	Social movement theory	Influenced by external stakeholders who oppose their actions	Challenge to status – replace existing values	External effort shapes the self identity of actors	

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