Shifting Power Dynamics: The #MeToo Movement

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR DACHER KELTNER

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BY ARJUN CHANDRAN, CASSIDY HARDIN, MICHELLE LEE, MELANIE RUSSO, & YANA PETRI

Dacher Keltner is a Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he directs the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab. He is also the founder and director of the Greater Good Science Center. Professor Keltner's research interests include emotions, social interactions, power, and behavior. In 2016, he wrote the best-selling book *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence*. He also served as a consultant for the Pixar movie *Inside Out*. In this interview, we discuss the shifting power dynamics in modern society, the influence of power on individual behavior, and the effects of power inequality that lead to the #MeToo movement.

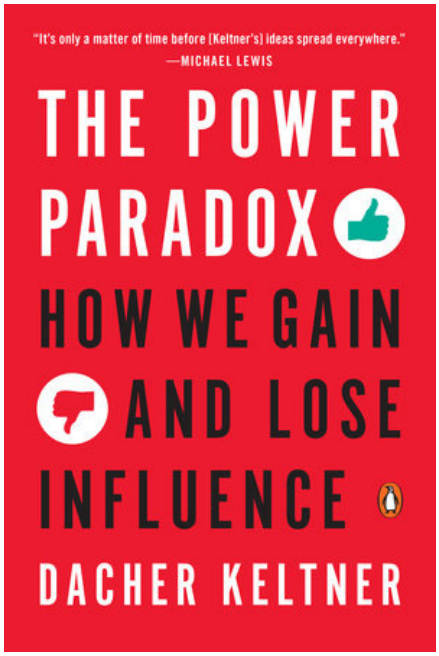
BSJ: How did you get into the field of psychology? How did your childhood influence your interest in studying power, social perceptions, and behavior?

DK: I grew up in LA while my mom was getting her Ph.D. in the late 1960s. Then we moved out into the country in the foothills of the Sierra by Auburn. I think my parents are what got me into psychology. My dad is an artist, and my mom is a literature professor. In a way, art and literature are our deepest statements about psychology. It is hard to capture consciousness like literature does (I don't think science will ever get that close), or emotion like art does. I was raised in a special environment, going to museums, having mom read quotes from William Blake and Virginia Woolf. When I went to UC Santa Barbara for undergraduate studies, I felt inclined to study psychology as a discipline. But the big moment was my postdoctoral work with Paul Ekman. Paul, 84 now, pioneered the measurement of facial muscle movements. It took him seven years to figure out how to look at a face and know what facial muscles, which we share largely with chimpanzees, are moving. While in graduate school, I went to one of Ekman's talks, where he described how you could measure emotions anatomically. I had looked at paintings all my life, and I was just blown away by that idea. I got to be a postdoc with Ekman and that got me into the science of emotion. I study hierarchy and emotion, and hierarchy really means power, status, class, and inequality. I just wrote this book *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence*, which summarizes everything that I had done for 20 years. I realize now that I became interested in poverty and power after my parents moved my brother and me from a middle class community in LA to an extremely poor rural town.

BSJ: You have developed a theory that addresses the individual and social implications of power. How do you define power?

DK: The social-psychological study of power is dominated by Cameron Anderson in Berkeley Haas, and Serena Chen, my colleague. We started that work 25 years ago, which led to our current theories. Economists think of power as money, political scientists think of it as the right to vote. Yet, there are a lot of examples in history that have nothing to do with money and nothing to do with the political state. Berkeley is an inspiring example with the free speech movement, which led to the antiwar protests. These poor undergraduates who had no support faced military opposition and changed the world. I was not at peace with the idea that power was money, or politics, or military. We defined power as your capacity to alter the state of another person, or other people. This definition becomes really psychological. A lot of diseases during pregnancy are about the power struggle between the fetus and the mom. Younger siblings are the revolutionaries and older siblings are the fascists.

Figure 1. Keltner's book *The Power Paradox*, which summarizes 20 years of his research on power.[2]



To say there isn't power in these dynamics is ridiculous. Power does not really correlate (only by a factor of 0.2) to how much wealth you have. You can be a billionaire and not do anything for the world, or you can be a very poor person who changes something and does a lot for the world. Bertrand Russell, the great philosopher, says, "power is the basic medium where all social interactions take place," and I believe that. Love, sibling dynamics, mother and child, and work are all about power.

BSJ: In your Google talk, you mentioned that the Machiavellian way to power is now less effective than the empathetic way to power. Could you explain the difference between these two?

DK: Western scholarship pits two hypotheses against each other. One is Aristotelian. Writing in classical Greek times, Aristotle thought that power could be found through virtue. He argued that power took courage, kindness, impartiality, and empathy. The other is Machiavellian. Machiavelli was a politician who got kicked out of his job. He went to his country estate and thought about how he could get back into the political game. Finally, he chose to write a book about power to the Medici in order to get his job back. He wrote *The Prince*. This book is about lying, deception, leading through fear, ensuring your allies are weak. *The Prince* was fitting in one of the most violent periods of history and promoted weakening others for gain of power. About 1500 years ago, we were really hierarchical, male-centered, patriarchal… Slavery was okay, polygamy was okay, and expending human life for your own gain was acceptable. Slowly, the civil rights movements have moved us away from these things. There's a lot of data that shows that, pre-Trump, we were moving toward the more empathetic and Aristotelian form of power, where people would sacrifice for others and build social networks. Now, sadly, we have the rise of the strong men again.

BSJ: Before we talk about how power influences behavior, we would like to ask you some neurophysiology questions. First of all, what neurological changes are brought about by power?

DK: Our behavioral data indicates that, when you are in power, you lose the ability to take the perspective of others. For example, we have seen that the more powerful person in a relationship often has trouble reading their partner's emotion from a photo of the face, so there is what we call an empathy deficit. One of my students studied the vagus nerve, which is the biggest bundle of nerves in the human nervous system. We found that the vagus nerve tracks compassion. My student interviewed privileged people with power and showed them images of suffering: kids with cancer, kids in a famine… People with less power had a vagus nerve response, and people with a lot of power did not have a vagus nerve response. Overall, we found that the empathy-compassion network gets deactivated by a certain amount of power, with exceptions of course.

> *"...pre-Trump, we were moving toward the more empathetic and Aristotelian form of power... Now, sadly, we have the rise of the strong men again."*

BSJ: Why do you think there are more men in power now even though physical dominance shouldn't be as important as intelligence?

DK: I think that gender inequality is the most important current issue besides climate change and mass incarceration. #MeToo is real, women are slowly rising in power compared to 60 years ago. The proportion of woman-senators is increasing, women are rising in the STEM fields… But the U.S. is a little behind other countries in terms of these trends. I was recently in Davos and I talked about sexual harassment. Harvey Weinstein is the perfect embodiment of the power paradox. He started a film company, made good films, became a big influence, and then turned into an animal—his social and financial power led him to unethical behavior. But that's all over Hollywood, Washington D.C., all over tech, and we know that now.

Compared to Canada, Finland, Iceland, which have a gender balance principle in their cabinet, the U.S. lags behind. Donald Trump is a deep throwback. Most people who support him have trouble with women in power.

BSJ: In the recent USA Gymnastics sex abuse scandal, more than 265 women accused Larry Nassar of sexual assault. What can we do in the future as a society to help women report earlier and ensure that sexual abuse is much less frequent?

DK: I would like to first direct you to an article: "Sex, Power, and the Systems that Enable Men Like Harvey Weinstein." About 80% of women are facing sexual harassment at work, but it's difficult to have accurate estimates because so many of them are silent. Until recently, we didn't have a language to express this type of abuse. Women said, "Well, he did kiss me in the copy room, but it was a mistake." We should rethink that. When people say that "Harvey Weinstein is a sex addict and he needs therapy," I say bull. That is not the story. He is violent and he assaulted people. He does need therapy and he can pay for that, but the deeper and more troubling story is that anywhere—in Hollywood, Washington D.C., the tech industry, in universities—we have a social organization where the majority of those in higher power are male. Young women are coming in as assistants in Hollywood and 94% of directors are male. You can see that there is a system in place that makes it radically more likely for incidents like sexual harassment to happen. So, what's the solution? Frank language and reporting with details. "This is what you did, and this is the policy. You cannot grab somebody's ass." Frankness and science-based precision. While teaching a group of leaders in Kaiser Permanente, I noticed that three out of the six medical directors of the company are women. It's the first time in the history of medicine where there are this many women in such high positions. These women were inspired by *The No Asshole Rule*, written by Bob Sutton in Stanford. They created a set of policies to prevent sexual harassment. These policies explicitly stated what the employers could and could not do. With these policies, even in an alpha male environment, these women were able to speak and stand up for themselves. This example shows how important it is to establish the right policies to prevent sexual harassment. The second important thing is giving women power. If there was a board that makes executive decisions where someone is acting like Harvey Weinstein and if there were women on that board, there would be a difference in the decisions the board makes. It really is fundamentally about promoting equality and giving women power. Also, if there were just as many male interns as female interns, the situation in Hollywood would change. As you have more gender equality in work places, the issues regarding sexual harassment, assault, and rape diminish because women are there to hear the story, develop policies, and punish people accordingly. It is a power struggle.

Figure 2. Keltner served as a consultant for the movie *Inside Out*, which suggested that allowing yourself to feel every emotion—including sadness—is a fundamental part of life.

BSJ: What do you think is the psychological reason behind the victims' silence?

DK: There are many studies that inquire how power changes the brain and how we think and behave. It's called the power of approach and inhibition theory. People in power often are able to say what they want and take what they desire. However, people who do not have power feel constrained in various aspects. People in lower power feel a greater threat, have higher cortisol levels, greater sympathetic autonomic nervous system activation, and greater blood pressure. Their minds are more inhibited; when they speak, they hesitate, interrupt themselves, and [do] not say what they actually think. Imagine being a young woman of lower power, facing a committee full of males. Silence becomes an obvious ending to that story.

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BSJ: Moving away from gender dynamics and focusing more on the hierarchy of power, how, in your opinion, could we prevent people in higher power from behaving unethically? Could you possibly relate this to Trump's administration?

DK: People in higher power are more likely to cheat in a game where they can win money, take candy from children, and lie. You can tell how power makes individuals

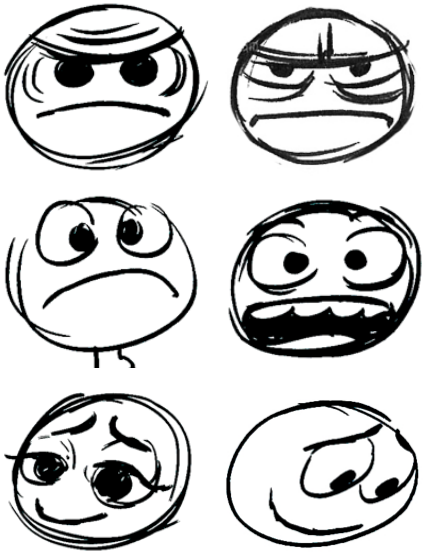

Figure 3. Emojis from the "Finch" Facebook sticker pack that Keltner and artist Matt Jones designed together. Emotions of anger, terror, and maternal love (two representations in each row). Image courtesy of Dacher Keltner and Matt Jones.

prone to unethical behavior from the study I conducted in Berkeley regarding how owners of different cars would drive past pedestrian zones.[1] About 46% of those who owned more expensive cars would drive past the pedestrian zone without stopping, while those who owned poorer cars would be more likely to stop every time at a pedestrian zone. Such examples are everywhere. Officials of the administration, like the Veterans Affairs Chief, might take their wife on a trip to Paris with a budget created by taxpayers' money and justify it as a necessary act. People in power become blind to the unethical decisions they make because they justify it as a risk they needed to take as a person in power. This becomes relevant to the Trump administration when social psychology and social networking is involved. When someone of higher power is exposed on a social network and when people are able to comment on their behavior, leaders become inclined to act more ethically. This is a foundational trait that holds people accountable for their actions, and is a role of journalism. Many leaders of nations, dictators or presidents, have been afraid of social critics. Trump goes after news, and Hitler and Stalin were obsessed with artists, because artists are also social critics. The Soviet art was transformed into propaganda during Stalin's reign. Consequently, with respect to Trump, you need critical commentary and transparency, which is something that already exists in the science community through peer-review and open data.

BSJ: Could you tell us about your experience as a consultant for the film *Inside Out*? What's the central wisdom of that movie?

DK: *Inside Out* has very good Berkeley connections. There are often Berkeley streets in Pixar movies—*The Incredibles*; *Monsters, Inc.* I have known director Pete Doctor for a long time. He asked me about expression and emotion. He was having a typical experience with his daughter, who is eleven and is starting to become distant and move into a pre-adolescence space. He called me up and said that he could make a movie about the turmoil of becoming an adult. Pixar likes to bring in psychology experts and ask them to talk about science. I went in every six months for two and a half years. A group of people works on the script, the story, and comes up with drawings. I met with these small groups and asked questions. How many emotions do the characters express? What are these emotions? How do children behave when they have these emotions? How do we accurately recall our childhood? There are two important things about *Inside Out*. First, all emotions are there for a reason. For example, fear helps you avoid danger. Emotions are not crazy out-of-control purposes—they are functional. Second, it's okay to be sad. Pete once asked me: Is sadness different from depression? I told him that there is a big difference. You can be sad for a couple of years if you lose someone, while depression is almost a lack of emotions—an apathy. I didn't know it at the time, but Pixar was actually at a crisis in the movie. Pete wanted Joy—one of the main characters—to go on a journey with Sadness. The executive team disagreed—they insisted that it should really be Fear. But Pete kept persisting and sadness turned out to be the right emotion to use! It's amazing that after the movie people started asking me, "Is the central message of the movie that it's okay to be sad?" Usually middle-aged men who are also going through a middle-age crisis ask me that. And I'm always like: "To-o-om, it's okay to be sad!" And the middle-aged man starts crying and says that he watched the movie with his daughter and that it changed his ideas about life. Unfortunately, culture pushes us to think the opposite, that sadness is not okay. As a parent, I say to my daughter, "Okay, let's do some push-ups! Let's go on a hike! Here is some medication!" But it's important for people to embrace their sad parts of life to achieve closure—it's fundamental. When you have kids, remember to give them space and understand that sadness is a part of life!

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IMAGE REFERENCES

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