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## TOWARD THE THREE-LEVEL POWER DISTANCE CONCEPT: EXPANDING GEERT HOFSTEDÉ'S POWER DISTANCE BEYOND CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Power distance is one of the most researched dimensions of culture in Geert Hofstede's framework. The vast majority of scholars refer to power distance as though it were something self-evident. Despite the hundreds of studies conducted on the basis of power distance, to date no one has seriously tried to propose a reconceptualization of power distance. Against that background, this paper aims to redefine Hofstede's concept of power distance. It focuses on formulating a sketch of the three-level concept of power distance that essentially refers to Hofstedian tradition, but is at the same time entangled in different ontological and epistemological assumptions on the social world. The proposed way of understanding power distance creates space for, among other things, a more interaction-focused study on power dynamics in various settings. It also provides the possibility of formulating completely new hypotheses concerning psychological and sociological dimensions of exercising power.

**Key words:** power; power distance; Hofstede

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### W stronę trójpoziomowej koncepcji dystansu władzy: rozszerzenie dystansu władzy Geerta Hofstedeego poza kontekst międzykulturowy

Dystans władzy jest jednym z najczęściej badanych wymiarów kultury w podejściu Geerta Hofstedeego. Jednak zdecydowana większość badaczy odnosi się do dystansu władzy jak do czegoś oczywistego. Pomimo setek badań nad dystansem władzy, do tej pory nikt nie próbował dokonać rekonceptualizacji tej koncepcji. Na tym tle w niniejszym artykule zaproponowano nowe rozumienie dystansu władzy. Wywód koncentruje się na sformułowaniu zarysu trójpoziomowej koncepcji dystansu władzy, która zasadniczo nawiązuje do tradycji Hofstedeego, ale jednocześnie jest wolna od jej założeń ontologicznych i epistemologicznych dotyczących świata społecznego. Proponowany sposób rozumienia dystansu władzy stwarza przestrzeń, między innymi, do badań nad dystansem władzy skoncentrowanych na dynamice interakcyjnej w różnych warunkach. Daje także możli-

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wość formułowania zupełnie nowych hipotez dotyczących psychologicznych i socjologicznych wymiarów władzy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** władza; dystans władzy; Hofstede

## Introduction

Although Geert Hofstede proposed a paradigm of studying culture dedicated to managerial and organizational sciences, it later spilled over into the social sciences (for a meta-analysis of those studies see: Taras, Kirkman, Steel 2010; Beugelsdijk, Kostova, Roth 2017). This approach has gained universal recognition. Suffice to say, that Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* is among the 25 most cited books in the social sciences (Beugelsdijk, Kostova, Roth 2017; Devinney, Hohberger 2017). Supporters and critics alike have described it, for example, as a "monumental study" (Triandis 1993: 132) and even "more than a super classic" (Baskerville 2003: 2).

Notwithstanding the significance and the continuing popularity of Hofstede's framework, it is certainly not without its critics (see generally: Nakata 2009). His positivistic attitude towards studying the social world, especially culture, has been the subject of significant criticism (e.g. Baskerville 2003). Some have stressed that Hofstede's approach is intrinsically inconsistent (e.g. McSweeney 2002a, 2002b; Ailon 2008, 2009). Its predictive properties have also been challenged (e.g. McSweeney, Brown, Iliopoulou 2016). Hofstede's understanding of culture was referred to as being based on essentialist assumptions (e.g. McSweeney 2002a, 2009; Fang 2005). Moreover, the temporal stability of the scores on Hofstede's cultural dimensions is increasingly questioned (e.g. Tung, Verbeke 2010), but at the same time validated (Beugelsdijk, Maseland, Hoorn 2015). Some argue that Hofstede's framework ignores the contingency of values and the potential influence of a variety of other contextual factors (Chiang 2005). His methodological choices have also been strongly contested (e.g. Baskerville 2003; Ly 2013). For example, Hofstede's scale tapping power distance has become the object of varied criticisms (e.g. Spector, Cooper, Sparks 2001; Venaik, Brewer 2016). Another wave of criticism has stressed that Hofstede's framework maintains the deep differences between the West and the Others in the way that resembles orientalism (e.g. Kwek 2003; Ailon 2008, 2009; see Hofstede 2009). Moreover, some authors have contested Hofstede's paradigm of studying culture from a feminist perspective (Moulettes 2007).

This situation does not suggest that all Hofstede's findings – which have indeed resulted in a significant understanding of culture-related phenomena – should be completely abandoned. Besides the emergence of broad new frameworks for studying culture – especially those that can be utilized in

managerial and organizational science (e.g. Fang 2005) and in sociology (e.g. Sztompka 2019) – one could also argue in favor of reconceptualization and reshaping of certain ideas developed by Hofstede. To put it differently, although the limitations of Hofstede’s basic assumptions have been increasingly recognized and highlighted, there is still a need for studies focusing on particular aspects of his conceptual toolkit. Such a way of thinking assumes that essentially the best way to do good science is to “stand on the shoulders of a giant”, which includes a critical examination of existing theories and conceptualizations. For example, some basic Hofstede’s intuitions regarding the existence of cultural differences associated with the way power is realized seem to be sound and thought-provoking. Therefore, rather than aiming to challenge Hofstede’s approach to studying culture as a whole, we decided to look more carefully and comprehensively at one particular element of his framework, bearing in mind both the critical arguments directed towards it and his vivid responses (e.g. Hofstede 2002, 2003, 2009; Minkov, Hofstede 2011). In this vein, “moving beyond Hofstede” (Nakata 2009; Devinney, Hohberger 2017) – that is, rejecting the whole idea associated with power distance – should be replaced with “moving through Hofstede” – that is, a reconceptualization of this particular element of his framework (similarly see: Venkateswaran, Ojha 2019).

Following this route, the paper aims to place under scrutiny and redefine Hofstede’s concept of power distance (PD), which is one of the most discussed and researched dimensions of culture in Hofstede’s framework (see Ghosh 2011). Surprisingly, despite the wide impact of Hofstede’s idea of PD, the question of what that concept really embraces is rarely asked. Despite the hundreds of studies conducted on the basis of Hofstede’s concept of PD, to date very few of them have examined its conceptual features (Ly 2013). In this sense, our aim is not merely to repeat the already formulated objections to Hofstede’s framework, but rather to focus only on conceptual issues related to the PD. A critical elaboration on Hofstede’s definitions of PD allows us to develop a new three-level understanding of PD.

It should be stressed, that we are not proposing the full-grown theory of PD – a set of interrelated theses that describes, explains, and allows for prediction related to a given part of social reality. We rather develop a comprehensive conceptual grid that expands the Hofstedian initial understanding of PD in order to make the concept more congruent with the changes in understanding the social world that has been associated with both the so-called “spatial” and “material” turns as well as the more and more vivid tendencies in social sciences to prefer multi-dimensional approaches (e.g. Latour 2005; Warf, Arias 2014; Pellizzoni 2016). Moreover, our research is informed by those strands of social sciences (e.g. interpretative anthropology, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism) that call to move away from large, aggregation studies on culture,

typical for dominant strands in managerial and organizational sciences, towards those situated in the concrete social setting, focused on interactions happening *in situ*. Our approach is driven by the need to study real people in actual interactional situations rather than based on abstract generalizations built on aggregated data. Simply speaking, it moves away from studying people by referring to the scores of indexes. In this way, obviously we are closer to more ethnographic and interpretative approaches, which also allow for employing qualitative methodology to research PD. We believe that the PD concept could be reconceptualized to fit those approaches and if so, it will shed light on the various aspects that the Hofstedian narrative on PD misses. Last but not least, we aim at developing the concept of PD that is ready to be utilized in many different social contexts and settings and, as the paper's subtitle suggests, not exclusively linked with the cross-cultural managerial research practice. We believe that the core idea of Hofstede's PD is sound and appealing, but it needs reconceptualization to be applied to various research areas.

The discussion proceeds in four parts. In the first section, we review Hofstede's definitions of PD. The second section is devoted to pointing out some basic criticisms of Hofstede's approach to PD. The third, main part contains some basic elements of the proposed new, three-level concept of PD, which is based on Krzysztof Pałeczki's normativity-centered concept of power (2003, 2016). Pałeczki's understanding of power is quite distant compared to the implicit concept of power in Hofstede's writings. As we will see, changing the assumed vision of power inevitably influences and limits the range of possible ways of understanding PD. The three-level concept of PD covers the subjective, organizational, and interactional dimensions. This section also contains the discussion on the most crucial possible methodological limitations of the presented concept of PD. Finally, the conclusion demonstrates what the new concept brings to study on PD at various social settings. Note also that the sequence of the paper in some sense mirrors the basic features of Hofstede's approach. For the author of *Culture's Consequences*, the PD is the main subject of interest, along with other dimensions of culture and the concept of power plays only an instrumental and secondary role. However, the proposed reconceptualization of PD, as opposed to the original Hofstedian approach, starts with providing the explicit concept of power which is the building-block of the whole new understanding of PD.

## 1. Hofstede's definitions of power distance

PD constitutes one of the cultural dimensions (e.g. Hofstede 2001; Hofstede et al. 2010). More precisely, it is conceptualized as a cultural value. According to Hofstede's onion diagram, values are located at the deepest level of culture;

they form its core. Values are invisible at first glance, but their impact on social reality is of fundamental importance. Hofstede notes that values are “supported” by so-called practices (rituals, symbols, heroes), but such a statement does not shed light on the exact relationships between all of them. He is silent about the possibility of an opposite situation, where the values support other elements of culture. Hofstede’s theoretical framework lacks a clear understanding of what this support exactly means.

In *Culture’s Consequences* Hofstede notes that “the power distance between a boss B and a subordinate S in a hierarchy is the difference between the extent to which B can determine the behavior of S and the extent to which S can determine the behavior of B (...) The power distance, thus defined, which is accepted by both B and S and supported by their social environment is to a considerable extent determined by their national culture” (2001: 83). Notice that this definition is modeled on business relationships (between bosses and subordinates). Next, as Hofstede claims, it is the national culture that determines the preferences of the parties (bosses and subordinates) toward what they can do to the opposite side. Such a line of thinking has been criticized because it meets the criteria of so-called ecological fallacy (see McSweeney 2002a, 2002b; Brewer, Venaik 2014). Moreover, the above definition of PD cannot be regarded as a result of a thorough and deep reflection on the concepts used in it. This is, above all, because power distance is defined as a difference in “who can do what with respect to each other” within an already hierarchical situation. Hierarchy by itself seems to imply differences, also concerning the possibilities of specific actions of each party in the power relation. Consequently, this definition seems to be quite redundant. In the light of the quoted formula, PD is simply reduced to hierarchy or inequality in the amount of power “possessed” by subordinates and superiors.

One should note that Mauk Mulder’s concept of power distance, developed in social psychology in the 1970s, was the main point of reference and inspiration for Hofstede. According to Mulder, PD is “the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual (I) and a more powerful Other (O), in which I and O belong to the same (loosely or tightly-knit) social system” (1977: 90). Hofstede introduced the national culture component that was originally absent in Mulder’s definition which refers solely to the interactional realm. He replaced the interactional dynamics (described by Mulder as the oscillation between a reduction of PD and enhancing PD) with differences between countries or nations (some are characterized by high PD and others by low PD). Thus, Hofstede directs attention towards differences in the stable characteristics of countries or nations in regard to distribution of (in)equality (e.g. Hofstede 2001: 34). What is important is that he holds to Mulder’s idea that the “inequality of power” constitutes a substantial element of PD (when he appeals to “differences” between B and S in determining the behavior of another side).

In *Culture's Consequences* Hofstede formulates the second, more compact definition of PD as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (2001: 98). Such definition appears in both *Cultures and Organizations* (Hofstede et al. 2010: 61) and in countless papers and books that have utilized the PD concept. Notice that in this case the “expectations” supplement “acceptances” of unequal distribution of power. According to one interpretation, in this case PD covers not only subjects’ aspirations related to power (a normative element) but also the previous, broadly understood, social practices that maintain a certain mode of how power is exercised (a descriptive element). That second definition seems to cover the past and present experiences of actors involved in power relations, as well as their imaginations about the future (Ly 2013: 53). However, it is possible to read all of this assuming a coherence between the two presented definitions of PD. We claim that the phrase “supported by their social environment” that emerged in the first one covers the same meanings as the “expectations” that appeared in the second definition. Such a way of reading of *Culture's Consequences* assumes that these definitions denote similar meanings. In addition, the second definition refers to “less powerful members” and that limitation clearly did not occur in the first one. This definition is more roomy and much broader (compared to the first one), because of the lack of direct references to the business organization context. Moreover, the second definition is even more distant from the psychological and interactional approach explored by Mulder.

## 2. Critical discussion of Hofstede's conceptualization

Much of the literature on PD sounds like a well-rehearsed mantra both in reference to definitional issues (what is the PD?) and methodology (how to study PD?). One could ask: What are the assumptions that underpin the PD concept? How this PD concept is framed? How can some vague expressions that occurred in definitions of PD be understood? Where does the Hofstedian approach to PD fail? Addressing these questions will enable us, in the next section, to examine the possibilities of both dismantling the PD concept and reconceptualizing it.

### 2. 1. Against the “distribution paradigm”

Hofstede, walking in the footsteps of Clyde Kluckhohn and other early functional anthropologists, adopts the functional view about basic universal imperatives that need to be fulfilled in each society. Each of the proposed dimensions of culture has been linked with one of universal imperative. In this vein, PD is conceptualized as a dimension of culture related to the fact that

“the basic problem involved is the degree of human inequality that underlies the functioning of each particular society” (2001: 81). PD seems to reflect the range of answers found in the various countries to the fundamental question of (in)equality. It should be noted that the relevant chapter of *Cultures and Organizations* is entitled, “More Equal than Others”, and its subsection, “Measuring the Degree of Inequality in Society: The Power Distance Index”. All this demonstrates that for Hofstede the basic point of reference when elaborating on PD is (in)equality in society (or – and this could be even more misleading – in a given country). In line with this, the so-called Power Distance Index measures, as Hofstede insists, (in)equality.

In turn, in *Culture’s Consequences* Hofstede refers to Alex Inkeles and Daniel Levinson’s classic study describing the universal domains of culture (“standard analytical issues” in their nomenclature). One domain mentioned by the famous authors of *National Character* that is “amazingly similar to PD”, as Hofstede notices, is “relation to authority” (2001: 31). PD demonstrates differences in relation to power-related issues that arise in every society. In addition, all questions that form the Power Distance Index, in fact, concern power relations. Even the term “PD” suggests that power is most important in Hofstede’s reasoning.

Thus, the attentive reader may ask: Is PD related most of all to the (in)equality or to power relations? But these two phenomena, in Hofstede’s view, are not only inherently intertwined but even more – they are quite the same, or constitute two sides of the same coin. Although Hofstede does not provide a clear elaboration on those issues his conceptualization of PD as a dimension of culture that is related to (in)equality, but at the same time to power, brings to light some of Hofstede’s basic assumptions regarding the nature of power and its place in the social realm. It tells one about how Hofstede is framing the power. What is striking in Hofstede’s conceptualization of PD is that all power-related issues have been reduced to the (in)equality category (and *vice versa*). Obviously, power is interconnected with social (in)equality, but there is still no point in conflating these two concepts. A few reasons support such a view.

First, social (in)equality is determined by many factors, including power, which should not be treated in this case as a sole determining factor. It should be noted that when (in)equality is reduced to the “distribution of power”, it loses its depth and multidimensionality. Also referring to the mere “distribution of power” is a very crude way of measuring (in)equality. Thus, Hofstede oversimplifies (in)equality as a dimension of culture.

Second, conceptualizing (in)equality primarily as a result of power clearly demonizes the latter (especially in a case when the struggle with inequalities is positively valued). For Hofstede, power is connected only (or primarily) to “dividing the cake” but not “making the cake”. Perhaps linking (in)equality with

power could to some extent be justified by appealing to common intuitions on that subject. However, extensive academic research has pointed out various functions fulfilled by power and numerous consequences associated with operations of power that go beyond merely the (in)equality issue. It should be noted that if power were to be framed not as closely associated with (in)equality but, for example, with meta-coordination in the social system (e.g. Parsons 1957, 1963) or with setting necessary boundaries that enable actions (e.g. Hayward 2004), one would need to change the Hofstedian conceptualization of PD completely and search for a new set of indicators for PD.

Third, even when we accept the “unequal distribution of power” paradigm, it needs to be stressed that mere differences or disproportions in “possession” of power between subordinates and subjects do not automatically translate into substantial inequalities. This issue is more complex and depends on how power is exercised, how “power-holders” understand their obligations (e.g. securing the well-being of those “powerless”). It is increasingly recognized that power does not necessarily operate in a negative way, marked with objectification. It can also have consequences that may be regarded as positive – it can confer some agency and thus equalize certain actors with respect to each other. One can acknowledge a basic but still important difference between merely “having” power, but not making any use of it and “having” power and exercising it in some particular way and circumstances. Hofstede’s framework is silent on that issue. From such a perspective, it is obvious that disproportions in “possession” of power do not have to transfer into substantial inequalities, because “power-holders” can refrain from making use of their power. To sum all this up, mere distribution of power does not tell the whole story about inequalities in a given society. Such an approach leaves many crucial details unsettled.

Fourth, while the definition of PD focuses on the distributional aspect, the whole narrative presented in *Culture’s Consequences* demonstrates how power works in different social settings in a given society. Hofstede elaborates on leaders and followers, bosses and subordinates, parents and children, and teachers and students (2001: 80–83). This suggests a very broad understanding of PD that embraces many aspects and faces of power relations. Moreover, Hofstede points out how certain preferences with regard to power influence other spheres of life. This is an obvious inconsistency in Hofstede’s approach – PD seems to be basically associated with the (in)equality domain, but the conducted analysis refers to various subjects related directly and indirectly to power relations. It needs to be stressed that Hofstede’s analyses are much broader than mere “distribution of power”. Without doubt, there are always some differences in the degree of “distribution of power” (assuming that such a distributional approach is sound), but this is only one specific aspect related to the place of power in a given social setting (national culture, country, organization, group).

From this perspective, Hofstede's definition of PD is quite narrow – it reduces many different aspects associated with power relations in society into the “distribution” – but at the same time his overall analyses of PD are quite broad – they encapsulate a large set of phenomena related to power (e.g. communication between parties, decision-making processes, respect to “power-holders”, criticism of superiors). As a result, Hofstede's approach, instead of bringing conceptual clarity, brings a “conceptual malaise”.

## **2. 2. Hofstede's understanding of power**

It is easy to notice that PD concept has to be based – whether one admits it directly or not – on some concept of power. Ultimately, PD refers to both “power” and “distance”. The latter adds something to the former. What is striking is that in Hofstede's writings, power is seen as something external to parties to social relations. It is something which is pre-installed, objective, and thus measurable. We can call such an approach – borrowing from Rainer Forst – a “reified” understanding of power (2017: 10). Power is here imagined as a kind of substance that can be possessed by social actors and then exchanged or distributed. As we mentioned, stable preferences for the particular manner of its distribution constitute the Hofstedian PD.

In our opinion, the simple conceptualization of PD employed by Hofstede could not stand – not only because the underlying concept of power has not been articulated by him in detail and discussed in a more nuanced way, but – most of all – because the assumed vision of power is highly debatable and contrary to how power is understood in current literature (see e.g. Hayward 2004; Zimmerling 2005; Forst 2017) and how it was conceptualized in the past (see e.g. Foucault 1981; Bourdieu 1989; for a general overview, see Haugaard 2002). Any attempt to propose a new conceptualization of PD needs a clear determination of how the concept of power is understood. Consider, for example, a case when one would utilize the so-called communicative conception of power developed by Hannah Arendt (1970; see Habermas 1977). Then, the whole idea of “distribution” should be rejected and replaced by the “production” of power by participating in communicative actions of parties that “act in concert”. This demonstrates that the way power is understood, frames how PD is conceptualized.

## **2. 3. Problems with the “expectations” and “acceptances” component**

“Expectations” and “acceptances” – in this case related to power relations – might be formed on various bases. In fact, many psychological and sociological factors underlie those categories (e.g. worldviews, beliefs, schemata, rules, or a broad set of normative tools, but also architectural objects). In this respect Hofstede's narrative is too roomy and to a large extent distant from the language

of the social sciences. A more sophisticated concept of PD should enable to shed more light on the various processes that lead to certain – using Hofstede’s words – “expectations” and “acceptances”.

Knowledge about all these underlying processes is important for differentiating between, for example, high PD that is constituted by (1) terror-based power relations which are deeply internalized by subordinates or (2) charisma that emanates from superiors. In both cases, certain behavioral and, in many instances, psychological elements might be quite similar, but at the deeper level of analysis, these two possibilities cover different kinds of high PD. Hofstede’s conceptualization cannot deal with the existence of many different reasons why in the last resort people have similar, relatively stable preferences for power or the way of exercising power. What is obvious is that a simple self-report questionnaire employed by Hofstede does not provide the tools for differentiating between the various sources and modes of PD. When a respondent is confronted with three straightforward but nevertheless vague questions relating to whether subordinates are afraid to disagree with superiors and the actual and preferred decision-making styles of the latter (see Ly 2013: 57–61), he or she simply cannot give a detailed account of many different and most often subtle, highly contextual processes that actually form a certain “expectations” and “acceptances” component. Even Hofstede, when referring to high PD, notices that PD may have a different basis. He mentions that high PD is associated with “preferring such dependence (in the form of an autocratic or paternalistic boss)” (2010: 61). It clearly suggests that high PD has at least two distinct modes. The strong concept of PD should provide analytical tools that would open up the possibility to study the different variants or modes of PD.

### **3. Toward a reconceptualization of power distance**

We propose moving beyond the Hofstedian “distribution of power” paradigm when defining PD. It is possible to consider two general ways of formulating a new theoretical framework of PD.

The first way could be described as a robust one. Here PD is either associated with general preferences with regard to power relations (PD captures different ways of understanding power) or seen as a set of preferences relating to certain elements which, when activated, lead to the formation of different modes of power (PD captures different ways of power production). In turn, the second approach to reconceptualizing PD is a narrow one. In this case, PD covers only specific ways of exercising power (or social preferences relating to it). It stresses that power relations could be exercised in ways which enhance or reduce the differences between parties. Each of these general approaches to PD can act

as a starting point for developing a more mature – i.e. avoiding the abovementioned weaknesses of Hofstedian conceptualization – conception of PD. Let us examine these possibilities more closely.

(1) When PD is defined in the robust way, it demonstrates differences associated with the preferences of parties towards power relations (and hierarchy). PD directly addresses either cultural differences or individual differences in the nature of power. In this vein, PD highlights the differences in what people generally “accept and expect” in the case of power relations, which is much broader than their preferences with regard to the “distribution” of power. Some authors have already conceptualized the PD concept along similar lines. Norma R. A. Romm and Cheng–Yi Hsu define this concept as “«acceptable» work relationships between «bosses» and «subordinates»” (2002: 403). It should be noted that the “acceptance” is directed towards a very broad and roomy subject – the power relations between two parties (but not to mere distribution of power between them). Here “acceptability” is related to the multiple elements that constitute the whole relation between the two sides of power relations (i.e. work relationships). In a similar way, Martha L. Maznevski et al. (2002) understand PD in a very general sense as “preferences for hierarchy”. Similarly, Tom Tyler et al. define PD as “a degree to which people prefer authoritative and consultative style of authority” (2000: 1140). These approaches to PD move away from the very narrow understanding of PD by suggesting that PD covers many preferences related to various elements constituting power relations (e.g. communication, language, decision–making, stress, architecture etc.).

However, a reconceptualization of PD in a robust fashion might go even further. Let us consider below the scenario where the concept of PD emphasizes the production of different modes of power as an effect of both the different social actors’ mindsets and different social settings where power relations are exercised. Simply speaking, different mental–environmental templates “produce” different modes of power. Therefore, the differences in the distribution of power (inequality) are not the most important factor – a crux lies in how power is being established, materialized, which is crucial for its overall character which influences how it works and what it brings. In a sense, therefore, certain kinds of mindset related to power relations activated in certain social settings (that are relevant to power) produce certain modes of power (PD covers different modes of power). Here the “distribution” approach is substituted by “production” – PD describes what type of power is being formed. For example, one possibility worth exploring is to characterize the first distinguishable mode of power as “act in concert” and second as “command and obedience” (Arendt 1970). When the relationships between subordinates and superiors are close, dense, full of mutual dependencies, and marked by direct communication, the “act in concert” type of power is being produced (low PD). On the other hand,

when this relation is formed differently – the relationships are distant, rare, full of independencies, and marked by formal communication – the “command and obedience” type of power is being generated (high PD).

(2) According to the narrow definition, PD covers only the ways in which power relations are or should be exercised, which may either emphasize (high PD) or reduce (low PD) the differences between two parties in the power relation. Here these sets of factors that determine the basic differences between “bosses and subordinates” are in the background and the most crucial aspect is how the power relation is exercised (resulting in enhancing or flattening the differences). This approach rests on the following assumption. One can and even should distinguish the more stable, objective side of power relation and the more dynamic, fluid way of doing, performing, and exercising power relation. For example, a superior can still do more, in comparison to a subordinate, due to certain rules concerning their status and possibilities with respect to each other, but can still make this basic asymmetry less evident, for example by means of a friendly demeanor.

It is easy to notice that understanding PD in terms of the narrow definition brings certain potential advantages – specifically, it makes it possible to narrow the scope of the concept under consideration, which helps in its operationalization. Such reconceptualization of PD results in making this concept more uniform and compact. Consequently, it makes it possible to differentiate between PD and other phenomena (see e.g. Minkov 2018) and various power-related concepts (such as charisma and types of leadership). In the light of these benefits, this section will discuss the narrow approach in a more detailed way.

### **3. 1. A new approach to power**

As mentioned earlier, the concept of PD cannot be fully redeveloped without an explicit and sound conception of the power that underlies it. It is perfectly well-known that power is an essentially contested concept. Moreover, various theories of power could be classified in different ways. One can differentiate between approaches focused on interactional level dynamics between individuals (e.g. the behaviorism-inspired concept of power developed by Robert A. Dahl [1957] and his followers, and social psychological theories, such as Ana Guinote’s situated focus theory of power [2010], that stress the cognitive aspects of power) and those conceptualizing power as the feature of a social system (e.g. Talcott Parsons’ theory of power as “a generalized facility or resource in the society” [1957: 140] or Niklas Luhmann’s [2017] theory of power as a general medium of communication). From a different angle, one can distinguish theories that see power as embodied in coercion and radical asymmetry (e.g. Dahl’s linking power with getting another person to do something that he or she would have not otherwise done) and views that focus on the fact that power enables the

collective to “act in concert”, in a more symmetrical way (e.g. Arendt’s [1970] communicative theory that insists on working together or Peter Morriss’ [2002] ability-based definition of power).

Having in mind a variety of approaches to power, it is still possible to base the reconceptualization of PD on the understanding of power that meets four, deliberately established, specific criteria. We need the concept of power that is roomy, simple (but not oversimplified), interaction-sensitive (able to be applied to the interactional level and not meant to be a holistic, system-oriented, too embracing or all-pervading concept), and not too immersed in sophisticated theoretical assumptions. Although there are plenty of possibilities in this respect, we draw on Pałeczki’s so-called normativity-centered conception of power (e.g. 2003, 2016). Although Pałeczki’s conception of power has not yet been widely recognized or discussed – since it was published only in Polish – it meets the above criteria perfectly and could add more depth to the intended reconceptualization of PD.

According to Pałeczki, power is a type of social relation characterized by differences in possibilities of shaping social agency of the involved parties (subordinates and superiors). From such a perspective, power resembles a game about a social agency, where players (subordinates, superiors) simultaneously have at least some opposing goals, but where some of their goals are intermeshed. These two parties are always mutually dependent to some extent (Pałeczki 2016: 6). All this stresses that the determination of behavior of one subject by other is mediated by an “agency” factor (thus determining the scope of other’s social agency is a real kernel of power). This should be read as a criticism not only of old-school behaviorism (a similar voice in organizational science can be detected in Ailon 2006) but also of theories that unintendedly share certain post-behavioristic threads (for example, insisting on direct determination of the behavior as a crucial part of defining power).

For Pałeczki, power is essentially an asymmetrical (i.e. vertical) social relation. This is the most crucial feature of power which has been commonly recognized in the literature. However, asymmetry is understood by Pałeczki in a particular way. According to him, asymmetry is based on the differences in the possibilities (grounded in rules) of influencing the social agency of the opposite party – in a case of power relations, a subordinates’ agency could be modified by those in power to a much greater extent than in the case of opposite direction. Then, “power is such an asymmetrical social relation that it makes it possible for one subject to achieve his goals by determining the agency of a second subject (by objectification or empowerment)” (2003: 195).

Pałeczki stresses that for a more nuanced conceptualization of power it needs to be highlighted that every power relation is characterized also by some degree of symmetry between the parties involved (i.e. horizontal interactions).

Symmetry informs about the extent to which parties in power relations have to cooperate in a relatively equal manner in a given setting (see Phillips 2018, who differentiates between symmetric and asymmetric power). Contrary to what common intuition suggests, for Pałecky power seems to be a phenomenon that is to some extent based on the mutual co-dependency of parties. For instance, the well-experienced construction manager knows when to engage front line workers in joint decision-making about a certain aspect of their work. There are plenty of domains and issues where they (have to) cooperate.

In addition, Pałecky distinguishes counter asymmetry that is the scope of rule-based competencies ascribed in the power relation to subordinates that are directed towards their superiors. Simply speaking, it is an ability to shape superiors' social agency by subordinates. This element has not been often stressed either in popular discussions on power nor in professional dealings with that subject. However, some authors have already pinpointed that counter asymmetry is also inherent in power relations. For example, Michel Foucault – this time walking in the footsteps of Thomas Hobbes – points out that “there is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (1981: 253). One should note that the already mentioned construction manager is to some extent limited by the possible decision of workers to leave the workplace or quit the job, or by the formal legal prerogatives (e.g. a right to strike), which could bring serious problems to him or her.

Thus, power relation is not seen as a one-sided (only asymmetrical one), zero-sum game. Although asymmetry constitutes its most basic feature, another two (i.e. symmetry and counter asymmetry) add something important to the full picture of power. What is of crucial importance – according to Pałecky – is that asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry come from rules underlying the ongoing interactions that form the power relations in a given setting. We propose adding the spatio-architectural arrangements of a given setting where power relations are being exercised as a necessary factor co-determining the scope of actual asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry. Moreover, Pałecky notices that power is actually in constant flux – the scopes between these three above-mentioned aspects of power relation might be changed due to various factors. Power is not something ready-made, it happens and changes during interactions between people, but all this does not preclude the existence of relatively stable structures of power. Such a perspective suggests new ways to reformulate the PD concept and potentially makes it more nuanced and theoretically sound. Let us consider one possibility in this respect, which would be the starting point for proposed reconceptualization of PD.

Power relations might be characterized by saturation of asymmetrical, symmetrical and counter asymmetrical elements. A case where there is a significant asymmetry between parties, together with a small symmetry and

small counter asymmetry, could initially be described as a high PD situation. This scenario implies that there is not so much space for (to some degree) equality-based relationships between subordinates and superiors. Enhancing PD is associated with reducing symmetry or even counter asymmetry. Next, in the second scenario power relations are still characterized by the dominance of asymmetry, but together with a large measure of symmetry and/or counter asymmetry. In this case, there is plenty of space for joint actions by the two sides in power relations. Decreasing PD is associated with strengthening symmetry or even counter asymmetry. Such initial conceptualization of PD enables one to explore whether, and why, in a given society, organization, group, etc., the first (high PD) or second (low PD) scenario has been stable and dominant.

### **3. 2. Three levels of power distance**

In Hofstede's conceptualization, PD has a cultural–psychological component (“acceptances and expectations”) that captures the possible differences between people in their preferences with regard to power relations. The reformulation of PD might either mimic his perspective or, for example, move towards more interaction–focused, ethnography–oriented approaches that distance themselves from focusing solely on people's mindsets. Pałeczki's concept of power, to some extent, explores the latter possibility. As we mentioned, Pałeczki strongly emphasizes the role of social normativity that determines the scope of asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry in a particular power relation. We suggest that the role of spatio–architectural arrangements also needs to be accentuated in the case of power dynamics (see e.g. Rapoport 1990; Markus 1993; Dovey 1999), because of their participation in enhancing or decreasing asymmetry in power relations. In this regard, we try to develop a non–reductive approach to PD that integrates the subjective, organizational, and interactional levels of PD. It enables an understanding of PD as a specific working syndrome (see Triandis 1993) that is constituted by people's relatively stable preferences (subjective level), as well as by spatio–architectural arrangements and social normativity (organizational level) – all of which are supplemented or modified by parties in an interaction (interactional level). Here the emphasis is placed on the formation of working relationships between those levels that make a certain ratio of asymmetrical, symmetrical and counter asymmetrical elements stable for certain people in a given social setting.

There are some serious reasons behind the attempt to differentiate between these levels of PD. First, dismantling the concept of PD makes it possible to point out directly what is being studied, what part of the phenomenon the researcher is trying to capture. Second, each of the consecutive levels of PD is meant to focus the researcher's attention more on the interactional realm, where certain preferences relating to asymmetries clash with what organizational settings dictate.

### 3. 3. Subjective level of power distance

Let us start with the first, subjective level of PD, which is the most researched in current scholarship. In general, everyone – not only parties involved in particular power relations – has some personal preferences (perhaps not even articulated and conscious) concerning the exercising of power that lead to enhancing or decreasing either asymmetry, symmetry, or counter asymmetry. For example, some people may prefer to highlight the differences between the parties involved (e.g. by acknowledging status indicators), while others might value a more flattened way of exercising power relations (e.g. by utilizing status-lowering language). In consequence, one can say that there are people who subjectively prefer “high” or “low” PD. Thus, the concept under consideration covers the preferences for a ratio between asymmetrical, symmetrical and counter asymmetrical elements in power relations with respect to a given social setting.

One should note that this “PD mindset” can be more stable, fixed and consistent from case to case (rigid subjective PD) or, by contrast, be more contingent, dependent on circumstances, and flexible (contingent subjective PD). As we mentioned, Hofstede defines values, and thus PD, as invariant trans-situational preferences (see McSweeney 2002a). Such an approach excludes the possibility of contingent subjective PD. However, the character of subjective PD should not be treated as an assumption, but as a testable hypothesis. Moreover, much depends on the structural conditions where the power is exercised. Some such conditions provide more room for the contingency of preferences for the above-mentioned ratio, whereas others make it much more stable.

### 3. 4. Organizational level of power distance

Next, one should recognize the organizational level of PD. Thus, in reality, the actors enter power relations that are always located in concrete social and material settings, usually within a particular organization – which encompass both social rules, rituals and architecture, symbols, formal structures, etc. For example, the surroundings of particular interactions influence the way power is exercised. Consider difference between manager’s desks – one is massive, even intimidating due to its elevation in comparison to the rest of the office and made out of some dark wood and the other is much more modest. The former seems to act as a tool to enhance the asymmetry between the person behind that desk and her or his visitors. Naturally, the characteristics of desks in offices is only one example out of a plethora of material factors that can influence PD. The external and internal look of a given building and particular rooms in it, the latter’s placement in building, access paths to them, absence or presence of various symbols or personal things that belong to the organization’s members, and many more can and should be taken into account for the sake of a more adequate understanding of power dynamics.

Thus, organizational PD is a stable ratio between asymmetrical, symmetrical and counter asymmetrical elements in the power relations that are established by a set of rules and spatio-architectural arrangements that characterize that given setting. Needless to say, the organizational level of power distance, understood in such a way, is relatively independent of the actors involved in power relations that occur in a given setting. To some degree, PD is imprinted in a particular organization and in that sense it is objectified.

Since Hofstede strongly insists that it is the national culture that determines the preferences of the parties (bosses and subordinates) towards what they can do to the opposite side, he misses that certain types of organizations need a specific degree of PD in order to accomplish their organizational goals smoothly (in part regardless of national culture influences). In each police organization, various elements work hand in hand to stabilize certain, often quite high, organizational PD. In turn, the small start-up organization that is dependent on the creativity and inventiveness of their participants will drift towards a completely different register of PD. All this does not exclude the possibility of differences between various police organizations or start-up organizations in reference to PD, but rather stresses that there are certain structural forces that determine organizational PD. Thus, the organizational goals also need to be acknowledged as an important factor that, for a given organization, co-determines the stable ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry.

It is easy to distinguish the organizations where the various elements that constitute organizational PD (such as rules, architecture and spatial arrangements) express very similar ideas on how power needs to be exercised (coherent organizational PD) and those where there are serious inconsistencies between what they “communicate” in the case of power relations (incoherent organizational PD). It should also be stressed that even though one can speak of coherent/incoherent organizational PD, in the presented approach we exclude the following possibilities: organizational PD so coherent that it actually leaves no room to be filled with individual behavior of the parties involved, or so incoherent that it does not provide any normative guidance. A basic differentiation between coherent/incoherent organizational PD helps in dismantling the PD concept and enables the formulation of interesting hypotheses, especially dedicated to the formation of a given setting, work environment, and type of organization, that stabilizes a certain ratio between the existing asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry.

In addition, a question arises about the relationships between subjective and organizational levels of PD. Particular organizational PD might be in line with one’s subjective PD or in conflict with it. Many factors influence what happens in the latter situation. However, in a case of coherent organizational PD, the subjective preferences of participants can be overcome by the more dominant

set of factors associated with that organizational PD. In comparison, in a case of incoherent organizational PD, the people's subjective PD (which is not in line with what the organization requires) can manifest itself more openly and might therefore determine the manner in which power is exercised. Of course, these simple relationships do not demonstrate a universal regularity. In certain cases, for example, coherent organizational PD will not necessarily trump subjective PD into submission. In a situation of overregulation, some people may react with even higher degrees of disagreement to the consequences of given organizational PD. Without doubt, the intersections between the subjective and organizational level of PD form one of the more important processes that influence what really happens in actual interactions in regard to the relatively stable ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry.

### 3. 5. Interactional level of power distance

Yet the abovementioned two levels of PD are not the whole story. These previous levels do not take into account the adjustment of the asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry in power relations associated with the actual dynamics of social interactions and bargaining between actors. We assume that the underlying rules and spatio-architectural arrangements that ultimately guide the actions of those involved in power relations are not complete. Very often they leave some specific aspects of interactions unregulated and hence open to bargaining. Even if those elements determine the shape of interactions in a very detailed way, they still do not address every aspect of power relations. For example, work contracts and labor law regulations can be completely silent on whether employer and employee should refer to each other by their names, even nicknames, or whether they should be much more formal and official and use "Sir" or "Madam". Such micro-practices often influence how power relations are exercised. To recognize this, consider another example. It seems safe to assume that there are no rules relevant to employer-employee relation that specify the kind of watch that managers should wear in the work place. This highly specific "gap" can be "filled" by them, for instance, by the choice of a very expensive and visible watch. In this case, subordinates may feel even more inferior, due to this display of status, wealth, and influence by their managers. The basic manager-subordinate differences are already determined at the organizational PD level. However, "filling" one of these seemingly tiny and insignificant "gaps", like managers visibly wearing very expensive watches, can increase PD even more.

In consequence, the degree of incompleteness of the factors determining power relations in a certain setting opens up space for parties' situational readjustments, complementing what the rules and spatio-architectural arrangements dictate. Put differently, the very acts of exercising power relation – which is

characterized by its own scope of predetermined asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry – creates the possibility for some modifications. The “gap” arises not only from the mentioned necessary incompleteness of the rules and spatio–architectural arrangements as guideposts on how to “do power”, but also from the inconsistencies between all of them. As already mentioned, a situation in which, for example, what spatio–architectural arrangements “communicate” is not in line with what the relevant rules call for in particular power relation is not an exception. Consider the authority of a judge who presides in the courtroom that is small, unkempt and looks like a makeshift space. In this case, despite the set of both legal and customary rules that elevate the judge, his authority might be in danger.

The particular way in which given “gap” is “filled” can either increase or decrease the asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry between parties – and in effect increase or decrease actual PD between them. Interactional PD covers the reformulating, reshaping, redefining, and modifying by parties in a power relation the existing relatively stable ratio between asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry. In this case, the PD concept connotes what is actually happening in reference to how a particular power relation is exercised as a result of “filling” the abovementioned “gaps”. In simple terms, the interplay between subjective and organizational PD in a certain social setting results in an increase or decrease of the actual “here and now” ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry.

### 3. 6. Discussion

Even though the proposed three–level reconceptualization of PD can be regarded as an attractive theoretical proposal, we should also self–critically address some of its noticeable problems or challenges, mainly those connected with its application and operationalization. For the sake of clarity, one should first re–examine the subjective level of PD.

One could say that most of the quantitative empirical tools meant to measure PD that have hitherto been used in a plethora of different studies (including Hofstede’s original proposal) were, in fact, measuring scales of what is here referred to as subjective PD. Consequently, one could say that in order to apply the proposed subjective PD concept in some empirical project one should simply use the already available measuring scales (e.g. Dorfman, Howell 1988; Earley, Erez 1997; Brockner et al. 2001; Zhang, Begley 2011). However, such an idea is misguided, since the already available PD measuring tools can be regarded as focused solely on asymmetry between the parties involved in a given power relationship. They do not seem to address the symmetry and counter asymmetry in any manner. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the proposed subjective PD concept is about the broadly understood personal preferences with regard to

the specific ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry. In the light of the above, to measure subjective PD the researcher cannot simply use the already available measuring scales; rather, she or he has to create and verify completely new scales. Needless to say, this is a demanding challenge. Moreover, when trying to come up with a quantitative research tool meant to measure subjective PD one has to be ready to address certain other important issues – for example, whether a researcher should construct a scale to measure subjective PD regardless of particular contexts and circumstances in which specific kinds of power relationships can take place. Or perhaps the correct approach is to create scales that are explicitly context-specific? Independent of the choices one can make in this respect, it should also be borne in mind that trying to measure subjective PD with relatively simple quantitative measuring tools such as questionnaires is entangled in a rather fundamental problem. What will the proposed measuring tool in effect be measuring? Will it give an insight into the actual subjective PD of researched subjects – or perhaps only into their projections or declarations (including those that are not honest) concerning their preference in regard to the ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry? Obviously, one can try to avoid this and other issues with regard to quantitative research tools and argue, for example, that subjective PD should be measured with qualitative methods such as adequately designed interviews. Needless to say, such an approach also has specific pros and cons. Leaving them aside, however, one can still say that potential problems with measuring subjective PD are relatively small in comparison to the challenges posed by the organizational level of reconceptualized power distance.

It seems that there are no existing research tools the researcher could easily use to measure organizational PD. One could venture to say that in order to grasp organizational power distance empirically, one should use very different qualitative research tools. For example, with respect to certain written rules underlying power relationships in a particular context, in order to verify their ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry one has to employ some kind of thorough text interpretation method, which would adequately (from a perspective of specific and justified criteria) identify asymmetrical, symmetrical, and counter asymmetrical aspects in analyzed rules. This alone is a very complex and difficult task to undertake. However, one should remember that organizational PD is not determined solely by written rules. The basic, organizational ratio between asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry also comes from recognized social practices such as customs, which do not have a written form. Thus, in order to grasp them empirically, one has to formulate a method other than text interpretation, but one that is still primarily qualitative in nature. At this point, one could venture to say that observation and interview methods seem like a proper point of departure with a view to fully developing

adequate tools. A similar approach should be adopted in order to address another part of organizational PD – the broadly understood spatio–architectural arrangements in which particular power relationships take place and by which they are simultaneously co–determined. The organizational level of reconceptualized PD also poses challenges other than the suggested complicated development of adequate empirical research tools. Ultimately, if one assumes the incompleteness of that which determines asymmetry, symmetry, and counter asymmetry at the basic organizational level, and that incompleteness is presumed to be “filled” at the interactional level, then one has to prove it. Moreover, actual verification of this incompleteness is very demanding, particularly in view of the heterogeneity and complexity of the organizational level. For example, if written and unwritten rules of different social provenance and the spatio–architectural arrangements together form the organizational level, then perhaps there are no “gaps” to be “filled” at the interactional level or, at best, very small “gaps”. In addition to this issue there is the problem of “gap” identification criteria. Fundamentally, one can distinguish an outsider perspective on “gap” identification (where people outside the researched context are evaluating it; for example, researchers who conduct a passive observation) and an insider perspective (where it is those who are directly involved in a given analyzed context that are making evaluations concerning the incompleteness at the organizational level). Needless to say, these two approaches can produce quite different, if not contradictory results.

The above point on outsider and insider perspectives is also significant for the last, interactional level of PD. It is assumed in the presented reconceptualization that particular verbal and nonverbal behaviors of parties in a given power relationship and in specific interaction can either increase or decrease the PD between them (in comparison to its basic value at the organizational level). The question is, whose perspective should be the basis for evaluating whether a particular situation in an interaction caused an increase or decrease in PD? People directly involved in a given interaction can assess particular situations in it differently from outsiders, who are merely observing the relationship between the former. Obviously, the assessments of both insiders and outsiders are done in accordance with their individual subjective PDs. The highly relative character of general PD evaluation at its interactional level is not the only noticeable problem here. As a result of the inherent heterogeneity, complexity, and plurality of interactional behaviors it seems extremely challenging to try to confidently identify specific single behaviors – or even clusters of a few behaviors combined – as those that ultimately caused an increase or decrease in PD. In other words, should one treat behaviors in power relations holistically and in a Gestalt–like manner? Or perhaps one should typologically distinguish even their most subtle aspects, which would make it possible to specify what particular behavior of a given person in a specific moment of interaction (such as a slight eye roll or yawn)

caused a change in PD? These questions are significant from the perspective of a choice of research method dedicated to the interactional level. Ultimately, the former possibility seems to be more appropriate for the application of certain qualitative, interpretative methods concerning human interactions; whereas the latter scenario fits well with the quantitative tools that employ video recordings or the method of independent judges, just like in certain nonverbal communication research.

In the light of the above, one could get the wrong impression that the proposed three-level reconceptualization of PD is a misguided and flawed project. That is a superficial way of interpreting certain problems identified in any theoretical framework. Ultimately, the problems identified can and should be interpreted as an undeniable sign that three-level reconceptualization of PD explores new ways of thinking about PD that can be developed in directions that seem to be unavailable to other approaches. For instance, the presented framework has been even further developed and applied to grasp empirically selected aspects of judges – witnesses courtroom PD dynamics in Cracow Regional Courts (Dudek, Stępień 2021). More specifically, the researchers appropriated the concept of three-level PD to the very specific judicial setting and particular social relation. Although, they focused mainly on interactional PD, but, after all, two other levels had to be taken into account. Using the passive observation of court hearings, substantiated by the half-open observational questionnaire, provided necessary data for a comprehensive assessment of the interactional dynamics between judges and witnesses. It demonstrates that the proposed PD scheme can be both operationalized and made suitable even to a very peculiar context and combined with the qualitative type of research.

## Conclusions

Everything stated above leads to an important conclusion. PD should be regarded as a specific working syndrome that is constituted by people's preferences (subjective level), as well as by social normativity and spatio-architectural arrangements (organizational level), and interactions between parties (interactional level). It needs to be analyzed as a dynamic, multi-faceted concept. Such a line of thinking gives rise to a number of considerations. For example, one should note that the subjective PD of parties in a power relation might be different (e.g. their subjective PDs can match with each other, or they could be in tension). Obviously, there are certain stabilizing forces that work to attain a degree of relative uniformity in this case, but, at the same time, other forces work in the opposite direction – resulting in the disproportions between people in their subjective PDs. As we mentioned, organizational PD (especially

in a case of coherent organizational PD) might stabilize the realization of power relations, which explains why they work well, even in the case of the tension scenario. All this demonstrates that the three-level PD concept enables the researchers to pose new hypotheses that directly refer to the various levels of PD and the relationships between them.

Moreover, we – as well as some other authors (Todeva 1999; Paulus et al. 2005; van den Bos et al. 2013) – believe that examining the completed questionnaires designed to study people’s preferences relating to PD, as Hofstede’s approach indicates, cannot capture all three-levels of PD. As we said, the large survey technique could be employed to “track” only the subjective PD – not without problems and after adding questions intended to examine preferences relating to asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry in power relations. However, when it comes to examining the organizational and, ultimately, the interactional level, more complex research tools are needed. Without focusing on how existing structures (rules and spatio-architectural arrangements) determine people’s demeanor and choices relevant to exercising power, and how people actually interact in a particular setting, we will not be addressing the essence of advanced understanding of PD. In a certain sense, the traditional bipolar value “dimensional” (high and low PD) approach is too flat and not context-sensitive. It excludes a whole range of potential small-step adjustments and modifications that are crucial for our reconceptualization. As we have argued, “gaps” and omissions of factors that form a stable ratio between asymmetry, symmetry and counter asymmetry are “filled” by the actions of people involved in a given relation – at the interactional level. All this enables an understanding of PD as a negotiable cultural syndrome that depends heavily on the time, the situation, and the occupational context. The presented conceptualization adds the possibility of a contingent character of PD, and moves away from the perspective that suggests that PD is constituted by overstable, independent-of-context, pre-installed preferences that are similar in all settings. Our proposal enables the study of PD *in situ*, taking into account the plethora of relevant details.

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