

2 Ethical Limits on the Use of Influence in Hierarchical Relationships

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In a hierarchical relationship, by definition, the superior is entitled to exert influence on the subordinate and the subordinate is obligated to accept the superior's influence. These rights and duties, however, are not unlimited. Ethical use of influence presupposes certain intraorganizational and extraorganizational limits on the demands and requests that the superior is entitled to make and that the subordinate is expected—at times, in fact, permitted—to carry out. To set the stage for a discussion of such limits, I first review some of the moral principles according to which influence attempts must be assessed and present a typology that distinguishes among different means of influence.

Influence, for the present purposes, is defined from the point of view of the target of an influence attempt. By this definition, *social influence* refers to a change in the actions, attitudes, or beliefs of a person (P) resulting from induction by another person or group (O)—the influencing agent (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). *Induction*, in turn, refers to an identifiable act by O whereby O makes available to P a specific action, attitude, or belief, or perhaps a new pattern of responding or a different way of interpreting events that challenges habitual reactions and existing beliefs. The induction, which may take the form of a suggestion, a request, an order, a demonstration, an attempt to persuade, or an offer of information, may be accepted, rejected, adapted, or perhaps ignored by P. The induction is not necessarily deliberate and intentional; for example, O may unwittingly set an example or serve as a model for P. For present purposes, however, I largely restrict myself to deliberate induction, because this is the domain in which the most obvious ethical issues arise.

MORAL PRINCIPLES IN EVALUATION OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Before examining the ethical implications of different means of influence and the ethical limits on the use of influence in hierarchical settings, let me introduce some of the moral principles that are central to the evaluation of influence procedures. Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace, and Walters (1982) identified four moral principles that are especially applicable to the ethical issues that arise in social science research. These four principles seem equally applicable to the ethical issues arising in interpersonal or organizational influence attempts:

- *Autonomy or self-determination*: Does O's influence attempt respect the values and decisions of P? This principle is tantamount to Immanuel Kant's dictum of treating others as ends in themselves rather than as means to extraneous ends.
- *Nonmaleficence*: Does O refrain from inflicting harm on P in the process of exerting influence?
- *Beneficence*: Does O's conduct live up to the positive obligation of promoting P's welfare?
- *Justice or fairness*: Does O's influence attempt respect P's rights? Does O extend equal treatment to people in equal positions and ensure that people are accorded what they are entitled to?

Ethical issues arising in influence situations are most likely to implicate the principle of autonomy or freedom, because it touches the core of an influence relationship. An influence attempt, whatever its nature, represents an effort to change the other's behavior or thinking. Successful influence means that P has changed from what he or she would have done or thought in the absence of the influence attempt. Thus, the question about the extent to which the targets of influence act freely, on the basis of their own decisions and in line with their own values, automatically arises in influence situations.

It is interesting, in this connection, that some of the knottiest ethical problems often arise when influence agents claim, and indeed believe, that what they are doing is in the targets' own interest and for their own good. These circumstances are particularly conducive to guilt-free manipulation—to violation of the principle of autonomy in the name of the principle of beneficence.

MEANS OF INFLUENCE

In keeping with the central importance of the principle of autonomy, Warwick and I (Kelman & Warwick, 1977) proposed a typology of means used in implementing social intervention, which orders these means—coercion, manipulation, persuasion, and facilitation—more or less along the dimension of freedom. That is, the means of intervention vary according to the degree to which they encourage or re-

strict people's "capacity, ... opportunity, and ... incentive to make reflective choices and to act on these choices" (Warwick, 1977, p. 18). This typology can be generalized to distinguish the different means that can be employed in any influence situation.

At the most restrictive end of the continuum, *coercion* uses the threat of severe deprivation either to compel people to take actions that go against their preferences or to deter them from taking actions that are in line with their preferences. The next point on the continuum is *manipulation*, which can be divided into two subtypes: *Environmental manipulation* changes the structure of alternatives in the environment—for example, by creating *faits accomplis* that change the realities within which people have to navigate, or by changing reinforcement contingencies, as in behavior therapy; environmental manipulation leaves the person free to make choices, but within a deliberately modified framework. *Psychic manipulation* seeks to exert influence by changing people's motives, controlling the information available to them, or reducing their capacity to reason and choose. In both kinds of manipulation, the semblance of freedom is maintained, but the framework within which choices are made is modified by reducing either the capacity to choose or the availability of options.

Persuasion is a means of influence that attempts to change the target's attitudes or behavior by argument, reasoning, or debate. Although persuasion is an approach to influence that is generally consistent with the principle of autonomy or freedom, it brings its own ethical problems into play. Most notable among these is the possible asymmetry in power between O and P—between those who are in a position to exercise persuasion and those who are the targets of such an effort. Finally, the means of influence that is at the most "free" end of the continuum is *facilitation*, where influence basically involves making certain resources available to the targets. Examples might include provision of family planning services or process facilitation in decision-making groups. Although the target's freedom is maximized in this form of influence, ethical problems may well arise. The offer and availability of certain services may themselves structure people's choices and thus limit their options. Other sources of ethical concern are the possibilities that the services may be offered to some groups and not to others and that the threat of withdrawing the services may have mildly coercive implications.

Even though each of the means of influence raises its own set of potential ethical problems, the continuum from coercion to facilitation constitutes, on the whole, a rough ordering in terms of ethical acceptability, insofar as the steps on the continuum represent increasing degrees of freedom of choice for the target of influence. Nonetheless, it is not the case that coercion is never ethically justifiable or that facilitation always is. Ethical evaluation of the use of any of these means of influence in a given case may vary for several reasons. First, competing values and principles come into play in any particular influence situation and these may override the principle of autonomy. Second, each form of influence may be carried out in different ways that make a particular use of that means of influence more or less

ethically acceptable. And, third, there are subtle ways in which one form of influence may shade into another. Let me comment on each of these qualifications.

Coercive or manipulative approaches often are justified by reference to competing, overriding principles. For example, restrictions on freedom may be considered necessary in the face of serious threats to public health and public safety. Indeed, a facilitative approach, in the form of a policy that responds to such threats in a *laissez-faire* manner—making certain services available, but leaving individuals to decide whether to use them—may be considered irresponsible. Coercion is, of course, invariably justified by its proponents on the grounds that it serves a higher value: group survival, general welfare, national liberation. It behooves us to maintain a skeptical attitude toward such justifications. But conflict between competing principles is an inevitable fact of life and, despite the ethical concerns raised by the use of coercion, it cannot be ruled out under all circumstances. There came a point, for example, when implementation of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against school segregation required a degree of coercion. Much as I would have preferred voluntary compliance, I had no doubt that overriding values justified some curtailment of the principle of autonomy in order to put an end to racial segregation.

The fact that, in the previous example, the coercive means were used by agents of the federal government to enforce a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court makes a considerable difference in our assessment of the ethical acceptability of the action. This brings me to my second qualification about the ethical justification of means of influence at different points on the continuum from coercion to facilitation: Our evaluation of the ethical acceptability of using a given means of influence depends on the precise circumstances under which it is used in a particular case. Who is using it, under what authority, pursuant to what procedures, and subject to what constraints? Thus, the ethical acceptability of coercive means depends, in part, on the legitimacy of the influencing agent. For example, coercion used by the agents of a democratic government is acceptable on the presumption that the government's actions ultimately represent the consent of the governed, that these actions conform to a set of clearly specified rules and procedures, and that the agents are accountable for their actions. One might, in fact, argue that the enforcement of democratically enacted laws is not even coercion: Taxation without representation is coercive and, indeed, oppressive, but taxation with representation, even though it has a coercive component, is rooted in consensual processes and thus does not quite belong in the category of coercion.

Various other features of the use of coercion in a particular case also contribute to its ethical acceptability. Take a situation in which a community is threatened by the outbreak of an epidemic to which small children are especially vulnerable. The principle of beneficence would justify some curtailment of the principle of autonomy in this case. Whether the authorities would be justified in using coercive means to confront the epidemic—such as mandating the inoculation of all vulnerable children and imposing heavy fines for failure to comply—would depend on the way in which these procedures are selected and applied. The use of coercive means would be more justified, for example, if the authorities decided on them after care-

ful consultation within the community; if alternative, less coercive procedures had been explored and found ineffective; and if the penalties were applied fairly and equally. By the same token, a facilitative approach in this particular situation—such as opening inoculation centers in various neighborhoods—may be ethically unacceptable under certain circumstances, even though it conforms with the principle of autonomy. This would be the case, for example, if for reasons of cost or location the inoculation services were less available to some segments of the community than to others.

The ethical acceptability of manipulation also depends on the way in which this form of influence is used in a particular situation. Take, for example, a case of environmental manipulation, such as the structuring of the retirement program within an organization to encourage members to move on at a relatively early age. Environmental manipulation of this type

would seem more acceptable to the extent that the people affected participate in the process, are free to enter and leave the program, and find their range of choices broadened rather than narrowed. Manipulation also seems more acceptable if the manipulators are not the primary beneficiaries of the manipulation, are reciprocally vulnerable in the situation, and are accountable to public agencies. (Kelman & Warwick, 1977, p. 19)

Similarly, psychic manipulation, as may occur in a therapeutic relationship or an encounter group, is more acceptable to the extent that practitioners are aware (and make their clients aware) of the manipulative potential of the situation, build protection against or resistance to manipulation into the process, and explicitly set enhancement of freedom of choice as a positive goal of the interaction (Kelman, 1965, 1968).

Finally, a word on my third qualification about the ethical acceptability of means of influence at different points on the continuum from coercion to facilitation: There are subtle ways in which one form of influence may shade into another. We cannot assume, therefore, that persuasion and facilitation, the means of influence on the “free” side of the continuum, are always devoid of ethical ambiguities. Indeed, we cannot assume that persuasion and facilitation are always consistent with the principle of autonomy.

Persuasion may take on a manipulative or coercive aspect. This is especially true under conditions of asymmetry of power between P and O. When a boss, professor, or police officer seeks to persuade a subordinate, student, or citizen, respectively, it is almost inevitable that the difference in power that characterizes the relationship will intrude on the interaction. The effect of the persuasive attempt may well be to reduce the subordinates' perceived options, or subtly change their motives, or remind them that it may be in their best interest to go along with the persuasive attempt. At the societal or organizational level, the capacity to launch a persuasive campaign is not equally distributed across the board. Thus, though the targets of persuasion may be free to choose a preferred option, the options available for choice are restricted to those that have the opportunity to be aired.

Facilitation too may take on a manipulative or coercive aspect. Let us say a religious organization makes a day-care service available to parents in a poor community. Although the parents are free to accept or reject that option, its availability may structure their choices. The very fact that it is readily available gives that option an advantage over other options that the parents potentially could explore or create. When a service is offered by an agency that represents authority, it may communicate to people that they are expected to use it or even, under certain circumstances, that they are required to use it. Thus, facilitation may shade into manipulation or coercion.

In sum, the line between persuasion or facilitation, on the one hand, and coercion or manipulation, on the other, is not always easy to draw. Regardless of the means of influence employed, therefore, there is always a need to be sensitive to the ethical implications of any influence attempt and to the ethical ambiguities of an influence relationship.

ETHICAL LIMITS OF INFLUENCE IN HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIPS

The lines between facilitation, persuasion, manipulation, and coercion are particularly hard to draw in hierarchical relationships. Influence processes can become very complex and very compelling in the context of a hierarchical organization. In a hierarchical relationship within an organization, the superior is entitled, by definition, to exert influence on the subordinate—to issue demands and requests. The subordinate, in turn, is obligated to accept the superior's influence—to accede to her or his demands and requests. These rights and obligations, however, are by no means unlimited.

The ethical use of influence within an organizational hierarchy presupposes certain intraorganizational and extraorganizational limits on the demands and requests that the superior is entitled to make and the subordinate is obligated to carry out. Indeed, there are some demands and requests that subordinates are not only not expected to carry out but that they are not permitted to carry out. I refer here to superior orders that would require the subordinate to engage in or have complicity in illegal or immoral acts—in other words, to be guilty of what Lee Hamilton and I have called “crimes of obedience” (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). Short of crimes of obedience, what are some of the ethical limits on the use of influence in hierarchical relationships?

Extraorganizational Limits

The extraorganizational limits on the use of influence are defined by precisely the kinds of considerations I raised in the preceding discussion of the moral principles by which influence attempts must be evaluated and the way different means of influence measure up against these principles. An organization exists within a larger

societal context, and the principles and norms that govern social relations at large also must govern relationships within the organization, whatever the special character of the organization may be. Organizational requirements cannot be used to justify procedures that would be unacceptable elsewhere in the society. Furthermore, I maintain that an organization operating in a foreign country must adhere to the highest ethical standards of both societies. For example, an American-based multinational corporation operating a factory in a developing country cannot justify using coercive or manipulative techniques that would be unacceptable at home on the grounds that these techniques are commonly used and accepted in the country in which the factory is located. The reference point for what is ethically acceptable must be the more stringent norms of the company's home society.

As is true in society at large, the ethical use of influence within a hierarchical organization requires adherence to the principles of autonomy or self-determination, nonmaleficence, and justice or fairness. Beyond that, the principle of beneficence requires special mention, because it may be dismissed as irrelevant to the structured relationships that occur in an organization governed by rational-bureaucratic authority. The positive duty to promote the welfare of those with whom we interact, and particularly on whom we seek to exert influence, applies to the hierarchical relationships within organizations as much as it does to other human relationships.

Means of influence that are ethically unacceptable in the society at large because they violate the principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, or justice are also unacceptable within a hierarchical organization. Thus, organizational requirements cannot justify the use of threats or other coercive tactics, the practice of deception, the circumvention of informal consent, or the invasion of privacy. Of course, as is true elsewhere in the society, the ethical acceptability of a given form of influence may depend on the particular circumstances under which it is applied and on the precise way in which it is applied in a particular situation. Ethical evaluation takes into account the competing values and principles that come into play in the situation and the degree to which the influence attempt conforms to normatively prescribed criteria. For example, landlords are entitled to threaten tenants with eviction for nonpayment of rent, provided the landlords give the tenants sufficient warning, take account of their special circumstances, do not discriminate against them on the basis of their group membership, do not use harassment or intimidation, and do not try to short-circuit due process in other ways. In similar fashion, superiors in an organizational hierarchy have a right to threaten subordinates with termination of their employment or other status for poor performance, provided they do so in a way that is fair, considerate, nonharassing, and nondiscriminatory and that fully protects their procedural rights.

In short, I argue that the use of influence in hierarchical relationships within an organization is subject to certain ethical limits imposed by the society at large. The nature of the relationship between superior and subordinate entitles the superior to make certain demands and requests and obligates the subordinate to accede to them. The ways in which and the circumstances under which these demands and

requests are made, however, are governed by the same principles and criteria that define ethical conduct in the society. These principles and criteria provide space for variations in the means of influence that are ethically acceptable under different circumstances, including the circumstances that characterize hierarchical relationships. But the ethical use of influence in hierarchical organizations means that no blanket "exemptions" from these principles and criteria can be granted to such organizations.

Intraorganizational Limits

In addition to the ethical limits in the use of influence that are extraorganizational in nature, deriving from general societal norms, there are intraorganizational limits, deriving from the framework of legitimacy that provides the moral foundation of hierarchically structured, rational-bureaucratic organizations. A hierarchical relationship is marked, by definition, by an asymmetry of power between the two parties to the relationship. This asymmetry is blunted to some extent by the shared assumption that, within the larger society, the two parties are—at least in principle—equals as citizens and human beings and hence subject to the same rights and obligations. Within the organization itself the asymmetry is controlled by the framework of legitimacy that governs the relationship. This means that there is a common set of norms and rules to which both the superior and the subordinate are subject. These norms and rules are designed to ensure that superiors do not use their power in an arbitrary fashion.

Maintaining this framework of legitimacy requires certain intraorganizational limits on the superior's use of her or his rightful power in exerting influence. The framework of legitimacy sets limits on the use of influence by specifying the domain within which the superior may exert influence, the influence tactics that are permissible, and the mechanisms of recourse available to the subordinate.

First, the legitimate use of influence implies a clear delimitation of the domain within which the superior has the right to exert influence—the areas of the subordinate's behavior and functioning in which the superior is entitled to make demands or requests. One obvious distinction here is between job-related activities and the subordinate's personal life. Moreover, on the job itself, not all demands or requests fall within the domain in which the superior can legitimately exert influence. Clearly, superiors have no right to ask subordinates to perform illegal or immoral acts. They also have no right to assign tasks to subordinates that go beyond the job description or to control subordinates' private behavior (such as the way they dress) unless it interferes with job performance.

Second, within the domain of the superior's legitimate authority, there is a set of norms specifying what influence tactics superiors are entitled to use in their relationship with subordinates. To be sure, a coercive element underlies the relationship between the parties in a hierarchical structure. The superior has the capacity to impose certain severe sanctions on subordinates whose performance is below par, including dismissing them from their jobs, terminating them from their degree

programs, or giving them negative recommendations. But this reality does not justify the use of coercive tactics, such as invoking the sanctions in a manner that is harassing and insensitive, to a degree that is disproportionate, and as a device for eliciting specific behaviors. Furthermore, any use of sanctions must be subject to strict procedural rules designed to ensure that they are applied reasonably, fairly, in a nondiscriminatory way, and in accordance with due process.

The use of other means of influence, apart from coercion, is also normatively prescribed. Environmental or psychic manipulation within an organization, in the form of programs designed to channel members' choices in a certain direction, should be introduced honestly and in a way that maximizes members' freedom to participate in the program or opt out of it. Persuasion should be used with full awareness of the power differential in a hierarchical relationship and hence the possibility that it might shade into manipulation or coercion. The use of facilitation, in the form of making certain opportunities available to members of the organization, should be sensitive both to the possibility that what may be meant as an opportunity might be perceived as a requirement in a hierarchical relationship, and to the importance of making genuine opportunities available to all members who qualify, on a nondiscriminatory basis.

Finally, a third set of intraorganizational ethical limits on the use of influence—designed to ensure the legitimate rather than arbitrary exercise of power—is the ready availability of mechanisms of *recourse* and *accountability*. Subordinates who feel that their rights or expectations have been violated by their superiors—that is, that the superiors have abused their power—should have structured and accessible opportunities for a fair and attentive hearing within the organization. The office of ombudsman is an example of such an organizational mechanism. To be effective, mechanisms of recourse must be accompanied by the existence of procedures for holding superiors accountable when they overstep the limits of their authority, and by a history of using the procedures when the circumstances warrant them. Such mechanisms of recourse and accountability provide subordinates some countervailing power that allows them to protect and defend their interests in the face of demands from their superiors. The existence and use of such mechanisms within the organization are perhaps the most visible indicators of an organization's adherence to ethical norms.

CONCLUSION

Influence processes are ubiquitous in social life. People satisfy many of their own needs by exerting influence on others. Mutual influence allows people to coordinate their behavior to the benefit of both parties: Reciprocal accommodation makes it possible for each to help meet the needs and interests of the other. Social influence as such is ethically neutral. It can enhance welfare, freedom, and justice for both parties. But it also can reduce welfare, freedom, or justice—often by way of an outcome that serves the interests of O at the expense of P. Ethical evaluation of any given episode of influence depends on the form of influence used, on the

balance it achieves between competing moral principles (such as welfare and freedom), on the precise procedures involved in the influence attempt and the circumstances surrounding it, and ultimately on the relationship between the two parties.

The potential for ethical problems increases when there is a power discrepancy between the two parties—when the influencing agent has a power advantage over the target of the influence attempt (cf. Kelman, 1972). Thus, ethical problems almost inevitably arise in hierarchical relationships, which by definition are characterized by an asymmetry of power. The ethical use of influence in hierarchical organizations, therefore, requires special sensitivity to the limits that must be observed when superiors exercise their legitimate right to address demands or requests to their subordinates. On the one hand, superiors are subject to extraorganizational limits: The use of influence within an organization must adhere to the same moral principles, norms, and criteria that govern influence in the society at large; there are no blanket “exemptions” from these principles for organizations (including organizations based in one society but operating in another society that sets less stringent limits). On the other hand, superiors are subject to intraorganizational limits: The framework of legitimacy that provides the moral basis for the superior’s right to make demands and the subordinate’s obligation to accede to them also sets limits on the use of influence by delimiting the domain within which influence may be exerted, specifying the influence tactics that may be employed, and providing mechanisms of recourse for the subordinate and accountability for the superior.

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