

Power and Role Shifts in Relationships

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll continue to discuss relationships by focusing on:

1. Power and Role Shifts
 - a. In Constructive Relationships
 - b. In Destructive Relationships

1. Power and Role Shifts

As you've learned in previous lessons, there are lots of elements in terms of which we can think about relationships. Power and role are two more of these elements, and they can affect relationships both positively and negatively.

Power is the ability to accomplish tasks or get tasks accomplished. However, in regards to relationships, power is the ability or authority to direct actions or influence emotions.

Power is involved in each **role**, or sense of owning responsibility, or the right to make meaningful contributions in a group or situation, that we play in our lives.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Sometimes power and role are quite natural, as with a parent and child relationship. Obviously, the parent has more power than a small child. But as a child matures, that can and will change. Older children are given a new roles, such as taking care of smaller children or other responsibilities in the home.

Power and role are also involved in the relationships we have with one another as adults, and these relationships can be either constructive or destructive.



TERMS TO KNOW

Power

Literally, the ability to accomplish tasks or get tasks accomplished; regarding relationships, the ability or authority to direct actions or influence emotions.

Role

A sense of "owning" responsibility or the right to make meaningful contributions in a group or situation.

1a. In Constructive Relationships

In any relationship, things can change depending on **context**, or a specific situation in which a relationship is felt or acted within.

However, a constructive relationship has:

- Flexibility
- Shared responsibility

This means that the parties in a constructive relationship can change depending on what's best for a particular context.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In a relationship between spouses, something could change in terms of who's the breadwinner. Perhaps one person loses their job, and the other person has an opportunity for a better paying job.

That person might decide to take the job, and the other person will stay home with the children. They'll be flexible about those roles depending on the context; there could also be flexibility in terms of who cooks, who takes out the trash, and who pays the bills.

Depending on time and any number of other elements in a given context, there can also be changes to shared responsibility.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This could be true at work if somebody's out sick, and you are given more responsibility as a result. There's a willingness and ability to change, be flexible, and share responsibilities in this constructive relationship because the context calls for it.



TERM TO KNOW

Context

A specific situation in which a relationship is felt or acted or acted within.

2b. In Destructive Relationships

When the power and role structures in relationships are more rigid, conflicts can arise; the relationships can then become destructive because of the conflicts.

In a destructive relationship where things are inflexible, there is not a change in the power and role structures in any context, even if it would make sense for a change to occur.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps two people in a marriage are very comfortable with their roles, and this has worked well so far. Then something changes; maybe one person loses their job and has to take a lower paying job.

However, the other partner feels that it's not their role to go out into the workforce. This person continues to stay at home, which could impact the couple's financial stability. Because there is a rigidity in terms of what each person thinks their role is, a conflict can begin.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In a work setting, you might have a new project come in that requires actions to be taken and decisions to be made. None of this is happening because the other people at work do not feel that they can move ahead without permission from someone above them, even when the context changes.

If there are less people available, you might need other people to step in and make some decisions to get

things moving. The attitude of the others might be, “Well, it's not my job. We have to wait for the supervisor to sign off.”

Because the power roles are very rigid and inflexible, there could be a conflict in the workplace between individuals, and on a wider level, in terms of how the conflict impacts overall productivity.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **power and role shifts** in relationships. You now understand that in constructive relationships, there is the ability to make shifts and share responsibilities based on context. In destructive relationships, rigidity and inflexibility despite changes in context can create or escalate conflicts. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

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