

# **Toward a theoretical framework of the (re-)production of domination and dominance**

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## **Overview:**

Using a critical realist perspective on human activity, we develop an outline theoretical framework that explains how social and organizational domination and sociocultural dominance are produced. In particular, by developing key insights from Hegel, Weber, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Williams, we propose a synthetic conceptualization of domination as a relatively stable social-moral relationship involving moments, dimensions, and modes of superordination and subordination, and resulting in asymmetry. We also introduce a distinction between different moments of domination, and sociocultural relationships of dominance in order to distinguish between different moments of subject-mediator-object relationships and mediator-mediator relationships, and the differing modes and dynamics involved in these relationships. We clarify how domination and sociocultural dominance relate to asymmetrical consequences. By examining the moments, dimensions, and modes of domination and sociocultural dominance we contribute to, and link, both the moral evaluation of social and organizational life, and the analysis of social and organizational dynamics. The purpose of the proposed theoretical framework is to provoke and enable the future development of our understanding of, and critical research into, the dynamic(s) and consequences of social and organizational domination and sociocultural dominance for social hierarchies and inequalities.

**Keywords:** domination; dominance; critical realism; sociocultural theory

## **Introduction**

Within management and organization studies the issues of asymmetric power and domination are repeatedly raised in various different ways (Lawrence et al., 2005), including, for example, elite theory, social dominance theories, theories of dominant coalitions or in charismatic or narcissistic leadership (Howell and Shamir 2005; Chatterjee and Pollock 2017). The moral questions of the use of asymmetric power and domination, however, are rarely central to organizational analysis other than for critical management and leadership scholars that are variously influenced by, for example, Marxist (Knights and Willmott, 1983), critical theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, Sherman, 2005), critical realist (Reed, 2012), post-structuralist (Collinson, 1992, 2005, Ford, 2006), psychoanalytic (Schedlitzki et al., 2017), feminist (Gunnarson, 2016), postcolonial (Islam, 2012) or Foucauldian (Clegg, 1989) perspectives. Such streams of critical work have offered various insights into domination and its dynamics. There has been, however, little sustained effort to develop an overarching synthetic theoretical framework that captures the ways in which domination is produced, what it is, its links to the cultural realm, and which is also useful for enabling the moral evaluation of these processes.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline some of the main ways in which the concept of domination has been deployed in the management and organization studies literature, and we differentiate our conception of domination from the related concept of power. Second, we clarify the ontological, epistemological and axiological positions undertaken in our argument and outline the key theoretical framework of activity theory that is used to articulate and develop our theoretical framework. Third, we present and explain the generic definition of the theoretical framework of domination and sociocultural dominance. Fourth, we utilize this

generic definition to outline the dynamics of domination in the different moments of the theoretical framework – the intra-individual, the dyadic, the interpersonal, the intergroup and the inter-field moments of social interaction. In the discussion we explore the implications of our theorizing about domination and sociocultural dominance for the field of organizational studies and offer an agenda for future critical research. We conclude by advocating for a renewed and sustained focus on identifying and redressing the processes that generate social inequalities and dependencies.

### **Defining domination** – a form of transitive relationship in human activity

Domination is a transitive relationship within human activity whereby a dominating subject treats a dominated subject as an object, this dominated subject acts like an object for the dominating subject, and this relationships results in an increase in, or maintenance of, an asymmetry between the subject and the object, as denoted in Figure 1.

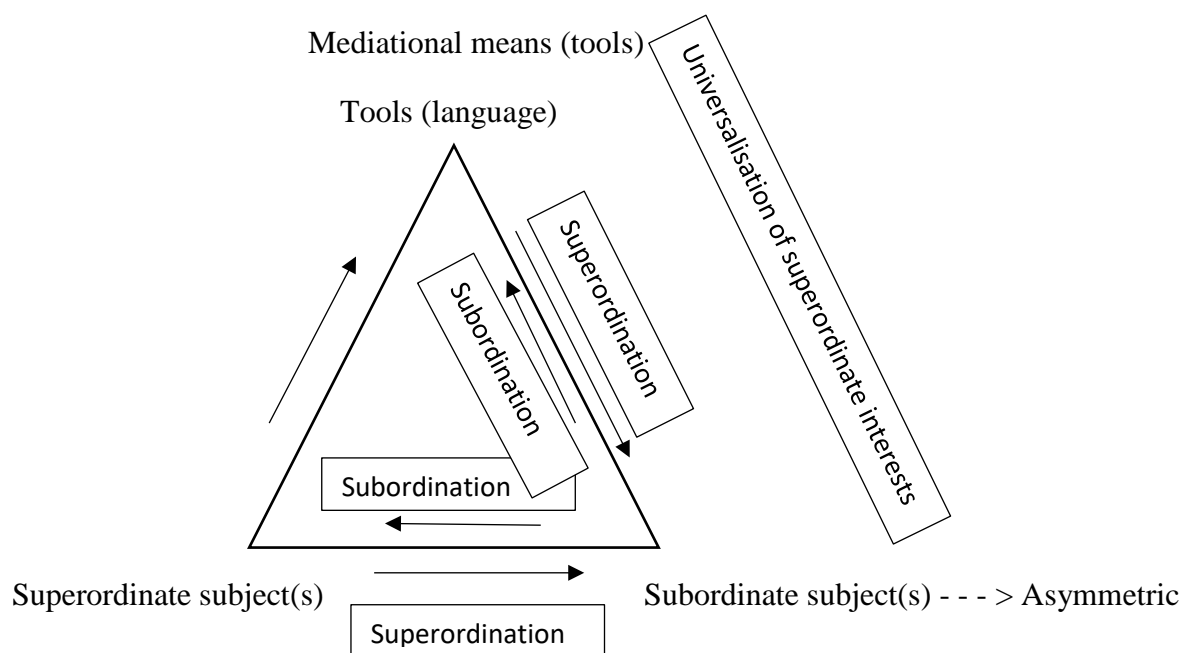


Fig 1: The generic abstract dynamics of domination

Figure 1 illustrates the generic dynamics of an actualised relationship of domination. That is, the subject treats another subject as an object, thereby superordinating herself, and the acted-upon subject acts like an object for the dominating subject, thereby subordinating herself. There may be both direct and mediated aspects of this relationship.

## Discussion

There are radical, extensive and numerous implications of our theorizing about how domination and sociocultural dominance are produced for the field of organizational and leadership studies.

Firstly, an immediate implication, of course, is the role of academic research in either reinforcing or maintaining domination or sociocultural dominance or in opposing or resisting these processes.

Secondly, the framework requires supplementation with theoretical and methodological approaches for identifying, observing, and sometimes potentially quantifying, the relational properties of subjects, objects and mediators, as well as how to identify, observe and potentially quantify asymmetric outcomes. These methodological developments require the formation of a calculus of domination that is both generic and abstract and composed of concrete contextually-sensitive tools. One generic conceptual tool that could be usefully rejuvenated is the concept of 'lifechances' (Weber, 1978) to account for potential asymmetric

outcomes - changes in the objective possibilities open to subjects that are produced through modes of domination.

## Conclusion

We conclude by advocating for a renewed and sustained focus on identifying and redressing the processes that generate social inequalities and dependencies.

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