

5-16-1997

Touchable Untouchables

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Recommended Citation

(1997) "Touchable Untouchables," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 7 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol2/iss7/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Touchable Untouchables

Author: Editor

Volume: 2

Issue: 7

Date: 1997-05-16

Keywords: Deception, Illicit Drugs, Truth

Abstract. With Mexican antidrug efforts as the context, this article describes some psychological impediments to developing and maintaining a trustworthy law enforcement cadre.

To better increase the probability of creating "Untouchables"--i.e., incorruptible government servants dedicated to fighting drug-related crime-- the Mexican Government has announced the creation of a Center for Confidence Control. It comprises physicians, psychologists, social workers, and polygraph technicians dedicated to administering drug and security tests required of drug agents joining the new Special Prosecutor's Office. Also, the new agents will receive salary increases, pensions, and additional benefits that putatively will contribute to service with honor. As with a past concept of the Nixon Administration--peace with honor--there are some problems with this effort.

First, psychologists, social workers, and other mental health professionals do not have empirically validated expertise to evaluate candidates who are or will remain trustworthy--both before hiring and at stages after hiring. The available objective and projective assessment instruments just do not deliver. One problem is that most of these instruments are developed nomothetically, i.e., based on how people--on the average--respond. Unfortunately, organizations needing trustworthy personnel where significant security stakes are involved can be rendered useless or worse than useless by a particular decision for a particular individual--requiring an idiographic, not a nomothetic approach. Attempts to have the best of both worlds--by using the idiographic approach--sound wonderful in the abstract but have not yet been successfully applied to the realm of trust.

A second problem occurs with the psychophysiological approach of polygraphy. A strong case can be made that polygraphy is often of low reliability and validity, depending on a host of biopsychosocial variables that seem most useful in explaining or predicting behavior. For example, once the individual to be assessed believes the polygraphic approach doesn't work or believes that he or she did not or will not do whatever authorizers of the polygraphic administration suspect, detection failure is likely. More elaborately, there are many covert psychological and biological phenomena, as well as social contexts, all mitigating against success even with an intensively monitored testee. And there are a host of psychophysiological individual differences--e.g., higher skin conductance arousal and longer arousal latency to novel situations among behaviorally inhibited than uninhibited subjects. (There is a counterargument that individual differences can be accounted for in individual cases through pretesting by the polygrapher. However, this does not address individual differences with a temporal range unaccounted for by the polygrapher or salient only in social situations or in a psychophysiological context unknown to the polygrapher.)

A third problem is that alleged experts in personnel security often harbor incorrect beliefs about what characteristics are linked to deception and which are not. In fact, research shows that the "bad guys" have a more accurate idea of what works than "the good guys" in a never-ending sequence of detection, counterdetection, and so on. (See Vrij & Semin (1996) below.) Also, the experts from the social sciences may be basing their advice on the statistical tools of null hypothesis testing, which render their experimental findings questionable. (See Herrera (1996) below.)

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A fourth problem is the disparity between the salaries of law enforcement and those which can be offered by “the bad guys.” This is usually a worldwide problem and can best be rendered somewhat moot by hiring individuals who believe law enforcement is not a job but a calling, a way of life, something they would do virtually for free. Even the serendipity of gathering such a cadre is mitigated by the reality of friends, family, and loved ones with different perspectives, wants, and desires. Also, some personnel who sincerely have the calling may also believe in vigilante justice, death squads, covert paramilitary interventions, and the like.

A fifth problem is that the pay disparity affects the social scientists and health professionals as much, if not more so, than law enforcement. In fact, many social scientists seem to have a huge sense of entitlement--their professional Titles not bringing them the respect they crave from the world as an overcompensation for perceived weaknesses. These scientists can become quite vulnerable to other sources that increase “respect”--like huge alternate incomes from the wrong source.

The sixth problem--of being killed or threatened with death--for doing an honorable job is perhaps the showstopper for law enforcement and social scientists alike. International drug-related corruption may be so endemic that the fifth problem remains the ultimate one. After all, should one risk death if one knows that some of one’s subordinates, peers, and superiors are “bad guys” as well?

Short of cloning social icons like Elliot Ness or bringing to life comic book and cartoon superheroes, the Center for Confidence Control has all the trappings of a confidence game. (See Dillon, S. (May 1, 1997.) Mexico remodels anti-drug program in time for Clinton visit. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>; Herrera, C.D. (1996.) An ethical argument against leaving psychologists to their statistical devices. *Journal of Psychology*, 130, 125-130; Scarpa, A., Raine, A., Venables, P.H., and Mednick, S. (1997.) Heart rate and skin conductance in behaviorally inhibited Mauritian children. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 106, 182-190; Sigurdsson, J.F., & Gudjonsson, G.H. (1996.) The psychological characteristics of ‘false confessors’: A study among Icelandic prison inmates and juvenile offenders. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 20, 321-329; Vrij, A., & Semin, G.R. (1996.) Lie experts’ beliefs about nonverbal indicators of deception. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 20, 65-80.) (Keywords: Deception, Illicit Drugs, Truth.)