
1-30-1998

Implicit Theories of Personality and Reactions to Political Scandal

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1998) "Implicit Theories of Personality and Reactions to Political Scandal," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss4/1>

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Title: Implicit Theories of Personality and Reactions to Political Scandal

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 4

Date: 1998-01-30

Keywords: Self-Consciousness, Typology

Abstract. This article describes several psychological constructs that may be useful in understanding reactions to political scandal.

As allegations, innuendoes, and even tawdry nuggets of so-called "plain fact" swirl around a political leader, a crucial task for that leader's allies and adversaries--foreign and domestic--is to assess reactions to scandal. Reactions are assessed among other political leaders; the members of various nongovernmental political organizations, e.g., interest and pressure groups; and the large numbers of other individuals who--at least in representative democracies--can have some effect on the tainted leader's prospects.

Assessment often involves the questioning of individuals. These questions usually address an end state or consequence of what is a reactive process: "Is this leader fit for office?" or "Do you believe the leader's denials?" or "Can the leader still effectively govern during the current crisis?" These questions are useful, but the earlier psychological components of the overall reactive process are ignored. This is unfortunate, for both those who seek to "get" the leader and those who are the leader's supporters might profit from attempts to modify these earlier components and thereby modify the reactive end state as well.

As an example, research in social psychology suggests that individuals can be usefully characterized as possessing implicit theories of personality. This construct denotes a nexus of beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotions about people--specifically that (1) each person possesses something called personality; (2) personality denotes some degree of psychological consistency; (3) this degree of consistency applies both to lower-order descriptors for that person such as thoughts, emotions, motives, and behaviors and to higher-order descriptors, e.g., introversion, deceptiveness, intelligence, impulsiveness comprising combinations of lower-order ones; and (4) the theory of personality is often not conscious but still significantly affects the psychological functioning of its possessor.

One significant aspect of an implicit theory of personality about which people may differ is the extent to which one views personality as largely consisting (1) of dispositions or traits that are pretty much immutable and that significantly color a person's behavior or (2) of much more malleable tendencies that more easily respond to self-discipline, training, sanctions, or rehabilitation.

The utility of knowledge about the implicit personality theories of people being assessed for reaction to a scandal can be significant. Those out to "get" the political leader might want to reinforce notions that the leader's misbehaviors stem from immutable traits that cannot be changed and that can be controlled or managed only with the greatest difficulty. These adversaries also might want to reinforce notions that any positive or extenuating behaviors of the leader stem from tendencies that are malleable, easy to change, and fragile in the face of the onslaught of other noxious and immutable traits. The supporters of the leader would seek to do the converse.

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In fact, consequences of the above can be illustrated by journalistic accounts of reactions to the scandal now enveloping the United States President. Even among those who believe that the President engaged in some sexual behavior with a female intern and those less sympathetic to his plight refer to his "sexual addiction," of "not keeping it in his pants," of having "no moral fiber," of being a "liar." Those more sympathetic advocate that the sexual behavior is not indicative of any significant aspects of the President's personality and refer to the machinations of people out to get him, negative features of the intern, and the constellation of environmental factors that might in a particular instance lead to a tryst.

This brief analysis is not intended to render moot the many interpersonal, group, and organizational dynamics involved in reaction to scandal. Nor is it intended to discount or deny ethical and moral issues. However, the "spin doctors" on all sides of the current scandal would do well to evaluate implicit personality theories in their quest to achieve their political objectives. All the more so in that the best approaches to assess these theories appear to be uncontaminated by political ideology or style and are valid across racial and ethnic groups, as well as across cultures. (See Chiu, C., Hong, Y., & Dweck, C.S. (1997). Lay dispositionism and implicit theories of personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 19-30; Dweck, C.S., Chiu, C., Hong, Y. (1995). Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A world from two perspectives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6, 267-285; Lee, F., Hallahan, M., & Herzog, T. (1996). Explaining real-life events: How culture and domain shape attribution. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 732-741; Trope, Y., & Higgins, E.T. (1993). The what, when, and how of dispositional inference: New answers and new questions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 493-500.) (Keywords: Self-Consciousness, Typology..)