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Surface and Source Aspects of Political Leadership: Implications for the Psychology of Scandal

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Abstract. This article describes psychological research bearing on the import of so-called character lapses on political leadership.

What makes a leader? Credentialed and lay psychologists alike exhibit huge divergences of opinion. And these divergences are exemplified by reactions to political scandal--viz., sexual scandal, be it the real and/or alleged sexual misbehaviors of a President Clinton, an ex-President Ortega, or a late supreme leader, e.g., Mao Zedong.

Reactions to sexual scandal in politics may be classified along three oblique dimensions--all of which constitute continually changing intrapsychic schemata encompassing beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, motives, and the like. First, there are private and public discourses on the impact on leadership traits--inferred dispositional attributes that are assumed to be positively correlated with something called exemplary leadership. Sexual misbehavior may suggest that some of these traits never existed, have decreased in intensity, may still retain their intensity but have lost their linkage with leadership, or have been overshadowed by other traits that are negatively correlated with leadership. Given that inferred dispositional attributes by definition are rarely directly observable, there can be much flexibility within and among discourses as to the types of logic, rationality, and other criteria that are applicable in supporting an opinion. The same goes for the realm of defenses and resistant strategies against seemingly disconfirming information to one's opinion.

Second, there are discourses on the impact on leadership behaviors. Sexual misbehavior may suggest ipso facto that a behavioral contract has been broken. Or, instead, time taken to engage in misbehavior suggests that there is less time to be engaged in necessary leadership behaviors--either through a zero-sum calculus of behavioral output per unit time or through inferring a linkage between external and internal misbehavior, e.g., imaginal perseverance of proscribed sexual pursuits. Flexibility within and among discourses concerning leadership behaviors seems most prevalent when evidence of misbehavior is supported by "he-said/she-said" statements as opposed to the smoking guns of audiovisual record.

Third, there are discourses on the impact on leadership contingencies. Here sexual misbehavior suggests that contractual operants--of leader and/or followers--are not being temporally associated with appropriate consequences. In these discourses, behaviors are deemed salient only in terms of their instrumental value as opposed to inferred intrinsic leadership properties. Flexibility within and among discourses concerning leadership contingencies seems most prevalent when salient consequences are judged to be more abstract as opposed to concrete.

All three leadership dimensions may be considered surface as opposed to source traits from the perspective of followers' psychology. In other words, a leader's ratings on the dimensions--before, during, and after scandal--are merely indicators of success in meeting followers' psychological needs--e.g., concatenations of feelings of physical safety and material security, senses of ego stability, or degree of consonance with boundaries between self and other and secondary intrapsychic schema of good and bad.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Political psychologists might consider developing an applied social science field that may be termed psychodynamic polling in assessing the effects on leadership of sexual scandal in politics from the perspective of all those involved in discourses on the leader's real and/or alleged misbehavior. This field might necessarily depend on projective as well as objective probings and, as with optimum forensic methods, yield rich pictures of comprehensive motives as well as sterile cognitive infrastructures. (See Barker, R.A. (1997). How can we train leaders if we do not know what leadership is? *Human Relations*, 50, 343-362; House, R.J., & Aditya, R.N. (1997). The social scientific study of leadership: Quo vadis? *Journal of Management*, 23, 409-473; Howell, J.P. (1997). "Substitutes for leadership: Their meaning and measurement"--An historical assessment. *Leadership Quarterly*, 8, 113-116; Ojito, M. (March 11, 1998). Stepdaughter accuses Sandinista chief of sex abuse. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Li, Z. (1994). *The private life of Chairman Mao* (Trans. Tai Hung-chao.). NY: Random House.) (Keywords: Leadership, Scandal, Typology.)