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# Treason, Treachery, and Betrayal of Trust: The Psychological Search for the Why

Editor

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## **Title:** Treason, Treachery, and Betrayal of Trust: The Psychological Search for the Why

Against one's people, country, family, and friends, betrayal of trust is a motif of human history. Two recent cases against one's country involve Gonen Segev "having aided the enemy [Iran] in wartime against...[his own] state of Israel..." (1) and United States citizen Joshua Schulte suspected of violating the Espionage Act by providing WikiLeaks with classified information stolen from the Central Intelligence Agency (2). Granted, either or both of these cases might just be unfounded or parts of some strategic deception operation. But if taken at face value, why do such things occur?

By far, the greatest difficulty in answering this question is choosing one's philosophy of science. Do the same successful approaches of the natural sciences, e.g., physics, to understanding, explaining, influencing, controlling and predicting phenomena work for the human sciences, e.g., psychology (3)? We'll return to this at the end of the article, but here note that almost all psychological research on betrayals of trust assumes the answer is 'yes'. Let's look at some of this research.

First, *stages of moral judgment* refer to what's right and wrong and then whether to do right and wrong based on fear of punishment and a belief that might makes right; a transactional and reciprocal approach wherein people get what they deserve; conformity with the values and expectations of the people in one's social environment; conformity with the general rules of one's larger society and constituted authority; applying a belief that all people have certain rights; and some sense of a golden rule with people treated as ends and not means (4). Then there's mismatch between what stage or stages might generate betrayal for a specific person and which of them the personnel security system we operate under effectively deters or defuses. This is not an easy thing to do with multiple stages to consider and the stages changing through time and in different situations. As well, operationalizing the various stages in our lives often can yield unreliable findings and surprising ambiguity and overlap.

Second, *social deviancy* refers to how we've been directly or vicariously conditioned for engaging in or avoiding social transgression—against specific people and in different situations. Here we're the product of our life experiences, and one salient belief is the degree to which doing what's right is right or just for suckers. Another is what constitutes a transgression (5). Comprehensive background investigations are crucial in collecting information bearing on who among us might have a social deviancy potential linked to betrayal precluding access to classified and sensitive information. A complication is real life concatenations of respect, compliance, trust, and betrayal depicted in films like Coppola's *The Godfather*.

Third, *preponderant affordances* comprise one or a small number of factors presumed to significantly control one's potential for betrayal. One common acronym, MICE, refers to money, ideology, coercion, and ego (viz., a narcissistic sense of entitlement, not the psychoanalytic structural component of the mind) (6). Another acronym, RASCLS,

refers to one's susceptibility to be turned by another person into betrayal through the need to reciprocate for a gift; respect for another's presumed authority; anticipation of a scarce and highly valued benefit; some sense of commitment; liking and being liked; and reliance on another for social proof—e.g., how to resolve challenging situations (7). I often think here of the German sociologist Max Weber's construct of *charismatic leadership* employed malignantly (8). A complication is how to identify the objective from the subjective—e.g., rich people who feel financially desperate, poor people who feel rich.

Fourth, *escalatory behavioral pathways* only secondarily presume constellations of psychological states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions but primarily identify behaviors necessary to betray and ever more closely approximating betrayal. These behaviors might constitute research on how to betray, planning and preparation for betrayal, and then the actual betrayal. Some of these behaviors and yet others suggest preoccupation with and fantasies of betrayal; an identification with previous perpetrators from real life, books and films; proving that one actually has the right stuff to betray; and belief that the betrayal is inevitable and justified (9). An often documented challenge to the practical value of *escalatory behavioral pathways* is that even as friends and associates of the betrayer become aware of relevant behaviors, they do not intervene directly or through personnel security systems. Maybe they're victims of the *social deviancy* maxim of not ratting someone out.

Fifth, *mining of big data* from various levels of analysis—e.g., social, economic, personal—can yield quantitative relationships directly and indirectly linked with betrayal. However, the mean conclusions from data mining might characterize not even one of the actual betrayers studied, might well be transient in terms of validity, and are susceptible to reactance. This last means that once the word got out about these relationships, any extant validity might dissipate as incipient miscreants intentionally behave differently, and people without the intention of betrayal turn to the dark side if wrongly identified (10). Seeming successes in influencing elections and selling commercial products fuel the mining of big data towards understanding, explaining, influencing, controlling and predicting betrayal.

Lastly, the *diathesis (vulnerability)-stress model* seems to have the most significant cachet among psychological researchers today (11). Like *preponderant affordances*, the future betrayer has some significant psychological vulnerabilities. When confronted with a significant personal or professional stressor, *escalatory behavioral pathways* kick in. Contingent on specific *stages of moral development* and conditioning for *social deviancy*, the *escalatory behavioral pathways* are even more likely. And *mining of big data* might yield specifics, even if problematic for future application.

But all the above research seems predicated on conceptions of cause-and-effect more supported by the natural world than the psychological one. Thus, philosophers of science still disagree on the relationship between mind and body. Statistical estimates based on classical probability theory of validity between and among variables and some

behavior have at best modest size. And even narrative and interpretive approaches to our own ever-changing life stories in which we are the perennial stars in comedy, tragedy, satire, and romance are treated deterministically (12). Interestingly, scientific revolutions over the last hundred years foretell a convergence on bizarre conceptions of human psychology wherein measurement affects what we measure, we can be and not be, we can be something and nothing and different somethings, and appear and be constituted as wildly different and similar at similar and different levels of analysis (13). Yet Shakespeare's betrayer Cassius is still germane today. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (14).

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**Keywords:** Treason, Betrayal of Trust, Treachery, Espionage

**Abstract/Description:** Treason, treachery, and betrayal of trust constitute a motif of human history. Can scientific psychology help us understand why?

**Disciplines:** Other Psychology, Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense Studies, International Relations

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