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Who's Running the World? Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders

Editor

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In a world of increasing interdependence, the number of political leaders who can impact the world for good and for bad increases. So, too, the value of understanding, explaining, influencing, controlling, and predicting their behavior. Psychological assessment—collecting, describing, and inferring from data as to what leaders have done, are doing, and will do—would seem to be essential (1). But there are many accompanying problems.

Although it is behavior that impacts the world, there are presumptions and controversies on what elicits and maintains behavior. Electromagnetic, chemical, and anatomical events within the body. Pastiches of thoughts, emotions, and images assumed to be within consciousness and the subconscious. Impingements of situations and socio-cultural moments. Individually and in combination these may have behavioral agency and constitute constructs such as personality, capabilities, traits, behavioral dispositions, and operational codes (2). There are a varying cast of the usual suspects.

As well, there are different sources from which data are collected—educational, work, and legal archives; formal psychological tests encompassing responses to verbal and non-verbal stimuli; structured and unstructured interviews; direct and indirect behavioral observation. What is described and inferred from these sources only have approximations of *reliability*—the same conclusion from the same data—and *validity*—the right conclusion from the data. There are many measures of each, each having issues of reliability and validity in a spiraling *reductio ad absurdum* (3).

Estimates of the reliability and validity of psychological assessment—an assessor's comfort with what they think they know—are based on several criteria. A leap and maintenance of *faith*. A trust in one's gut, *intuition*. Respect for *authority*—someone or something that is ascribed the status of being right or righter. Methods of *science,* viz., research, wherein the estimates through time are replicated or falsified with appropriate modifications (4).

For *science*-based psychological assessment there have been two contemporary crises. The first—whether assessment is *evidence*-based—can be quickly dispatched with (5). Even *faith, intuition,* and *authority* are evidence, and the crisis is not about <u>if</u> there's evidence but what <u>kind</u>. The second—whether the conclusions of assessment can be suitably *replicated*—bears on both *reliability* and *validity* (6).

At issue with *replicability* are the needs for better documentation by researchers for assessors of what procedures, materials, and subject samples were actually used. In addition, whether there was pre-registration of procedures, materials, analysis plan including statistics or other interpretive strategies, and predicted conclusions. Unfortunately, the more these needs are met, there may well be accompanying impediments to the research productivity and creativity.

It seems quite ironic and, perhaps, predicable that professional organizations such as the two APAs—the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association—have publically proscribed psychological assessment of political leaders on ethical not scientific grounds. For example, the latter has directed that it is "...unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion [about a political leader] unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement" (7). Given that both professional organizations laud the goals of contributing to the public welfare and discourse, sharing opinion widely would seem appropriate without being "granted proper authorization"—and closer to the American Psychiatric Association's professed concerns to behave according to virtue ethics (8). And as to "an examination", the intimation of direct, face-to-face contact does not seem prescribed by scientific methods. In fact, the reliability and validity of some interview techniques seem to problematize their very usage, e.g., in detecting deception (9).

So, there's good news for political leaders anxious that their very souls, if not minds, will be stripped bare through psychological assessment. Both ethics and science are not yet threats. And there are words and worlds to run.

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Abstract/**Description**: Should psychological assessment techniques be applied to global political leaders with the results conveyed to general publics worldwide? These techniques may not yet be ready for prime time.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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