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The Psychopolitics of Taboo

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Abstract. This article explores the construct of taboo within the contexts of human psychology and politics.

In human psychology and politics, the construct of taboo does not relate to one's ability to commit an act but to one's motivation instead. There cannot be a taboo against flying unaided through the air, but there can be one against eating meat or having sexual intercourse with one's siblings or stating that the emperor is truly wearing no clothes. In fact, the taboo construct not only denotes that one has the ability to commit what one must not commit, but also that one may have the motivation as well. Moreover, the taboo construct connotes that there have been transgressions--if not by the self than by others.

The taboo construct also connotes that there may well be evolutionary significance in the notion of the forbidden. This may be supported by historical analysis suggesting the omnipresence of the construct among human cultures. At first, the significance might have been linked overtly and directly to matters of individual and group physical survival. But almost immediately and concurrently, the significance also might well have pertained to matters of intrapsychic; interpersonal; and organizational stability with, perhaps, more precarious links with physical security.

In any event, regardless of the adaptiveness or other values of the construct for human psychology and politics, there is a tension based on paradox that simultaneously strengthens and weakens a taboo. The paradox? As one seeks to increase the probability of compliance, one may increase the attractiveness of what one must not commit.

The tension within taboo--as well as controversy about resolving the tension--is most easily observed in political efforts to proscribe behavior. For example--in efforts to proscribe school violence--should a political entity allow public illustration about the types of violence and the consequences or ban such illustration? In efforts to proscribe premarital sex, should a political entity allow sex education or ban it? On one level of analysis, such controversies are carried out on a playing field with rules based on empiricism, experimentalism, logic, and rationality. On another, these controversies reflect an ideological debate about whether proscription of behavior must be based on proscription of information about that behavior. All controversies reflect being hoisted on a petard of paradox that is ultimately faith-based.

The ultimate basis on faith is why all taboos are inherently sacred even if clothed in secular jargon. And why all taboos and the policies that seek to reinforce them are fated to be violated and then further reinforced leading to further violation towards a Sisyphean infinity. It is here that the metaphysical leads to a clear physical consequence--a moral for moralists and immoralists alike. (See Parker, S. (1976). The precultural basis of the incest taboo: Toward a biosocial theory. *American Anthropologist*, 78, 285-305; Rozin, P., Lowery, L., Imada, S., & Haidt, J. (1999). The CAD triad hypothesis: A mapping between three moral emotions (contempt, anger, disgust) and three moral codes (community, autonomy, divinity). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 574-586; Teoh, J-I. (1976). Taboo

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

and Malay tradition. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 10, 105-110; Tetlock, P.E., Kristel, O.V., Elson, S.B., Green, M.C., & Lerner, J.S. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: Taboo trade-offs, forbidden base rates, heretical counterfactuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 853-870; Totem and taboo: The real meaning of Camp David II. *IBPP*, 9(4).) (Keywords: Taboo.)