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Leadership and Sexuality: Power, Principles and Processes

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Leadership and Sexuality

Power, Principles and Processes

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Introduction

Sexuality in leadership: A long-neglected topic with vast implications for individuals and society

James K. Beggan and Scott T. Allison

Sexual opportunities can be construed as a reward for achieving a leadership role (Baumeister, 2010). For some species of animals, social dominance is the sole basis for sexual access to mates (Dixon, 2015). One way that social dominance expresses itself is through leadership. Although becoming a leader may afford sexual opportunities, it is also true that in the twenty-first century, rather than being seen as a benefit, sexuality can be viewed as potential liability for leaders, as people have become more sensitive to issues related to gender, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual harassment.

There is no shortage of evidence demonstrating that great leaders sometimes have poor judgment when it comes to issues of sexuality (Gamson, 2001). Even a quick glance at the newspapers or history books reveals how many careers have been ruined or irrevocably altered because of sex. Bill Clinton's entire tenure as president can be reduced to a punch line about oral sex. Technically, although guilty of marital infidelity, Bill Clinton's crime with regard to Monica Lewinsky related not to the affair, but to the charges of perjury that stemmed from lying about the affair. Of course, he only lied because he knew there would be a scandal if the affair caught the attention of the media. His perceived wrongdoing stemmed from both the fact that he was married and that Lewinsky was a low-level intern, with far less power than the President of the United States. Elliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner lost their jobs because of a weakness for prostitutes and sexting, respectively. Retired four-star general and director of the CIA David Petraeus resigned after news of a long-time affair with his biographer became public. Beloved entertainer, civil rights activist, and television surrogate father Bill Cosby had his entire life and career upended after allegations of years of sexual

misconduct. Donald Trump's presidential race was marred, but ultimately not derailed, by comments he had made years before the election about how being a celebrity entitled him, in his opinion, to make inappropriate sexual advances toward women.

The problems that are created as a result of sex are more systemic than the bad judgment of a few well-positioned leaders. The US military has repeatedly failed to adequately address issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault in its ranks. The Catholic Church turned a blind eye to years of sexual abuse by priests. Fox News became notorious because of a climate of sexual harassment that existed, manifested by the behavior of Fox News CEO Roger Ailes and talk-show host Bill O'Reilly.

In looking at the details of these kinds of cases, we repeatedly ask ourselves two questions: Why do unarguably intelligent and successful leaders put themselves into these kinds of situations? And why are we, as members of the constituency, continually surprised by these revelations? Shouldn't we expect it by now?

Although the question of why rich and powerful men (we are not being sexist here—it is more often men than women) risk their careers by engaging in illicit sexual activity is an interesting one, we suggest that the connection between leadership and sexuality is much more important, complex, and broad than the phenomenon of a sex scandal. Sexual leadership can be viewed as operating at both macro and micro levels. Issues related to sexual leadership come into play when a nation decides in favor of or against an abstinence-only policy with regard to sexual education, the Supreme Court rules in favor of gay marriage, or a husband and wife decide whether to try a new sexual position. Sexual leadership also comes into play in gray and black markets. What leadership dynamics are involved in recruiting, motivating, and managing women who work as strippers, or as prostitutes? The purpose of this edited volume is to explore the largely ignored relationship between sexuality and leadership.

We approach leadership and sexuality from two perspectives. As social scientists, we would like to better understand the way in which human sexuality affects leadership and followership processes. How do sexual dynamics influence how leaders do their jobs? How do sexual dynamics hinder or help with leadership processes? To what degree should leaders initiate policies that address sexual issues? An additional goal is to take on the role of social engineers and apply our knowledge to problems that leaders face with regard to controlling the expression of human sexuality. Ineffective leadership with regard to sexuality can ruin lives. Would better efforts at social engineering ameliorate these problems, and with it create a reduction in human suffering caused by leaders who poorly handle problems associated with leadership and sexuality?

Our seemingly never-ending surprise that our leaders engage in covert sexual practices or make errors in judgment about issues in a sexual domain can be explained partly by recognizing that it seems almost everyone has trouble talking about sexuality. Even science, or, more accurately, the people who do science, presumably operate through the lens of value-free and objective thinking, yet scholars themselves have issues with sexuality. Social scientists who study sexuality feel their careers are marginalized by more mainstream members of their disciplines (Irvine, 2014). For example, it is more difficult to fund research on sexual science, unless it has a clear medical purpose such as disease prevention.

The focus of this volume is on how power, principles, and processes influence the way that sexuality exerts an influence on leadership and followership. We consider power as the ability to influence an outcome to occur, more specifically with regard to the ability to control resources and others (Stuppy & Mead, 2017). Leadership and sexuality can both be understood in terms of the expression of power (Parker, Barbosa, & Aggleton, 2000). Leaders exert influence over followers. People who can influence others often step into leadership roles. Sexual attractiveness can be a means of exerting social influence over another, that is, acting as a leader. Leader status is a characteristic that many people find sexually attractive. Leaders' ability to control others can come about through legitimate as well as illegitimate means. It is typically well within an employer's authority to fire a worker for coming to work late. *Quid pro quo* sexual relations, on the other hand, are outside the permissible.

A principle can refer to a moral belief about what is right or wrong. Moral judgments decidedly come into play when we evaluate our own and others' sexuality and sexual behavior. Beliefs about sexuality and leadership are often prescriptive in tone, rather than descriptive of what has actually happened or did occur. Principles related to sexuality are often difficult to uphold. Perhaps the clearest instance has to do with the sanctity of marriage. Although marriage is a relationship freely entered into between two consenting adults who *a priori* promise to make a lifelong commitment to each other ("in sickness and in health and until death do us part"), a significant percentage of marriages end in divorce. Despite some complexities involved in making an estimate (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014), an estimate of 50 percent seems reasonable for the United States (Politifact New Jersey, 2012). One of the key elements of traditional marriages is sexual fidelity. Although statistics vary depending on the source, 30–70 percent of men report at least one instance of marital infidelity; about 20–68 percent of women report at least one instance (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016).

The third concept that is important to consider is the processes involved in understanding the relationship between sexuality and leadership. The processes involved in sexuality can range from micro-processes that last just a few seconds or minutes to macro-level evolutionary processes that have taken literally millions of years to play out. The act of judging someone sexually attractive might take only a second, but factors that influence what processes go into that judgment might have evolved across millions of years.

With regard to sexuality and leadership, we consider principles to be expressed through several prominent theories of sexuality. Sexuality can be viewed as a product of biology, as a psychological process, and as a sociological phenomenon. Biological theories can either focus on the actual process of having sex, as in the case of Masters and Johnson (1966), who studied the stages of sexual arousal, or they can focus on how evolutionary pressures have shaped the way sexual behavior is played out (Buss, 2015). Evolutionary psychology or sociobiology tends to look at the ways in which mate selection processes have evolved over time.

Another class of theories is psychological and focuses on the way people develop certain preferences. A classic example is learning theory, which can be used to consider the way in which an attraction to certain types of stimulation is reinforced (Hogben & Byrne, 1998). Social exchange theory views sexual behavior in terms of the way people evaluate the costs and benefits of a relationship (Cook, Cheshire, Rice, & Nakagawa, 2013). Like economics, social exchange theory assumes that actors are (at least mostly) rational actors who try to maximize their potential benefits.

The final approach we consider is sociological and focuses on the way the meaning of sexual activity is socially constructed. A prominent sociological theory of human sexuality is called sexual scripting theory (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). According to sexual scripting, the most important factor involved in sexuality is the meaning that we as human beings apply to sex. The conceptual basis for sexual scripting theory is symbolic interactionism, which focuses on how people use symbols—predominantly language—to create meaning (Longmore, 1998). From a social constructionist point of view, the importance and nature of sexuality is derived from how we, as a collective culture, choose to see it. Sexual scripts operate at cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). At the cultural level, sexual scripts reflect the influence of social institutions such as religion, the law, and mass media. Interpersonal scripts refer to how two or more people negotiate meaning with regard to sexual behaviors. Intrapersonal scripts refer to how an

individual feels about sexual activities, feelings, or beliefs. Different levels of sexual scripts can be consistent or inconsistent with each other. Consider, for example, kissing. Most people find kissing a pleasurable prelude to sexual activity, and as a result it is not too hard to find other people who might be willing to engage in kissing. Society tends to see kissing as a gesture consistent with both romance and sexuality.

In other instances, there can be conflict between different levels of sexual scripts. As a prominent example, in 2003 when Arnold Schwarzenegger was running for governor of California, a scandal broke because of allegations that he had sexually harassed women (Cohn, Hall, & Welkos, 2003). After an initial denial, he eventually apologized for the behavior, which had taken place as early as the 1970s and 1980s. The meaning of his actions changed between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Womanizing behavior was once not only condoned but, to some, considered heroic for a man in a leadership role. Norms of acceptable leader behavior have shifted and men have been slow to adjust. Donald Trump is a classic example of a male whose sexual misconduct horrified millions of Americans while drawing apathetic responses from millions of others (including some women) who cling to the anachronism that “boys will be boys” (Freedman, 2013).