What qualities make a political leader more or less influential? Philosophers, political scientists, and psychologists alike have puzzled over this question, and have proposed two very different routes to political power. The first traces back to Aristotle, who reasoned that a politician should—above all—be virtuous. He believed that political influence was to be found in virtuous practices such as temperance, courage, and humility. Machiavelli offered a much different approach; he advised political leaders to exert influence by force, manipulation, and violence, if necessary. In a paper published in Psychological Science, my colleagues and I coded the behavior of 151 U.S. Senators in political speeches for indicators of virtues and vices, and examined whether this index of their leadership style predicted their level of collaborative influence over others. For example, senators who spoke with a loud, steady voice and narrowed their eyes in determination were given high ratings on courage. And, senators who expressed excessive pride and spoke primarily about themselves were given high ratings on narcissism. We found that virtuous senators became more influential when they moved into a leadership role—specifically, a committee chair role.

In our data, expressing empathy for others, being concerned with justice and fairness, and communicating courage, increased Senators’ ability to gain co-sponsors on their bills when they became committee chairs. In contrast, senators displaying behaviors consistent with vices—particularly, psychopathy—became less influential when they moved into leadership roles. Results suggest that, when casting a vote, citizens should consider a candidate’s virtue. Voting for virtuous candidate may increase the likelihood that elected officials will have genuine concern for their constituents, while simultaneously promoting cooperation and progress in government.
In an effort to build on this work, I am involved with the Center for American Politics (CAP) at the University of Denver. As a Faculty Affiliate with CAP from 2017-2018, I conducted research on people's views of how power works; that is, whether people think of powerful individuals as having psychopathic traits and being primarily self-interested or as being social coordinators for the greater good. My current work aims to measure these views and use them to predict important outcomes, like leadership choice, trust in leadership, and the punishment of leaders who engage in immoral actions.

Reference


Diversity Matters

By Daniel Storage, PhD
Teaching Assistant Professor

A recent article in the New York Times reported that, in 2013, parents were two and a half times more likely to Google questions such as "Is my son gifted/intelligent/a genius?" than ones such as "Is my daughter gifted/intelligent/a genius?" (Stephens-Davidowitz 2014). In one of my own research studies, I searched through the language used by students in over 14 million reviews on the popular teacher evaluation website www.RateMyProfessors.com. Specifically, I searched for the number of times that students described their professors as "brilliant," "genius," and so on, and found that—in every field—male professors were described as intellectually gifted significantly more often than their female colleagues (Storage, Horne, Cimpian, & Leslie, 2016). Importantly, I found that male and female professors were described as "excellent" and "amazing" to an equal extent—pointing to a bias specific to superlatives about intelligence, rather than an overall bias against women. These striking findings are indicative of a pervasive, but understudied, cultural stereotype: Women are, on average, believed to possess less intellectual talent than men.

In addition to being problematic in and of itself, this "brilliance = men" stereotype may be part of the reason why women are underrepresented in STEM fields. Recent research suggests that practitioners in STEM fields are likely to endorse the belief that raw "brilliance" is necessary for success in those fields (Leslie, Cimpian, Meyer, & Freeland, 2015). If girls grow up in a society that believes (1) that brilliance is necessary for success in STEM fields, and (2) that they are less likely than men to possess such brilliance, they may be less likely to pursue careers in STEM. Consistent with this possibility, I have found that fields with practitioners who endorse the idea that "brilliance" and "genius" are necessary traits for success tend to have significantly fewer women (and other groups, such as African Americans) earning degrees (Storage et al., 2014 and Leslie et al., 2015).

So, what can we do about it? Two possibilities follow from my research. First, an ideal solution would be to eliminate the stereotype associating intellectual giftedness with men over women, which would make field-level "brilliance-required" messages irrelevant. Second, rather than emphasizing traits that put certain groups at a disadvantage (i.e., brilliance and genius), teachers should emphasize traits that
anyone can possess with the right amount of effort (e.g., hard work and dedication). It is likely the case that these traits are more important for success anyway.

References


Major Matters

By Peter Sokol-Hessner, PhD
Assistant Professor

Getting different academic fields to talk to each other is no small thing, let alone appreciate each other for what they can uniquely contribute. I teach an Advanced Seminar (ASEM) called Decision-Making and Neuroeconomics in which students from academic backgrounds as varied as finance, computer science, psychology, hospitality, biology, and philosophy, among others, read upward of 25 peer-reviewed scientific empirical articles about human decision-making during the term. While most students enter the course having read very few, if any, empirical articles in their lives, succeeding in the course is not simply about learning to read primary science, because the course readings are almost equally drawn from three different fields that take different approaches, value different things, and write about their science very differently: psychology, economics, and neuroscience. It's this very diversity of source that I believe makes this ASEM unique in several respects.

First, it puts all students equally on unfamiliar footing (no one has ever begun the course with experience in all three fields), with the consequence that this ASEM is an unusually supportive and discussion-focused class. Second, it teaches students to dissociate meaning from jargon – the easiest way to synthesize information and insights across these fields is often to leave specialized jargon behind, and distill meaning (and understanding) from the articles when students otherwise might not. Third, and perhaps most essentially, taking this fundamentally interdisciplinary perspective makes it self-evident that the broadest and deepest understanding is gained from integrating across disparate perspectives. Psychology is true to life, but often vague & ill-defined. Economics is clear and strong, but often divorced from bodies or feelings. Neuroscience is concrete and mechanistic, but can say little about preferences.
or thoughts. Valuing each field for what they can tell us about how and why people make decisions, while noting each field's weaknesses, I believe ultimately builds a stronger understanding of and appreciation for all three fields, and of course, our own decision-making.

Alumni Matters

By Gianmarco Cacciamatta
DU Psychology Alumn, Class of 2008

After graduating in the summer of 2008, during the financial meltdown, I became increasingly uninspired by the income potential that an undergraduate degree in psychology offered. Can you relate? Today, I am a full equity partner in one of the largest financial services firms in North America. I started out recruiting talent to the firm, then transitioned into financial planning for young families, began to work on increasingly complex family dynamics and corporate structures, and today lead a humble team that is regionally recognized for our work with humble to successful clients. How can someone with a degree in psychology make a successful career in financial services?

I never imagined that a major financial services firm would covet my degree in psychology. Today, corporate culture lacks productive empathy. Either people meekly accept mediocrity or lay down a draconian culture of results at all costs. Ironically, some executives write five-figure checks quarterly to learn psychology. They just call this study Self-Development, which – for better or worse – for often looks and feels like pseudoscience. Don't get me wrong, Tony Robin's is basically a behavioral psychologist, while Steve Siebold practices Freudian era talk therapy, and John Proctor focuses on the general abnormality in people's relationship with money and success. Seriously, take a closer look and you might find that the most successful executive or self-development gurus fall into either a stereotypical era of psychology or field of clinical study or experimentation.

I feel like we, my team and I, know a little more than when we started, however. We do our best to identify what got us this far in the hopes that we can better ourselves and our community. Although anecdotal, I attribute my success in a very cold industry to the humanism that a foundation in psychology allows me. I may not apply specific working theories or tempered neuroscience to my daily work. I would argue, though, that helping our clients understand what keeps them up at night financially while providing solutions based on healthy financial goals and dreams separates us from many advisors. Additionally, leading and developing teams of professionals by focusing on their individual attributes and family desires instead of traditional rewards and punishments creates a culture of tight-knit brothers and sisters truly devoted to achieving greatness as an organization for our community. What could a greater practical understanding and daily implementation of psychology offer America in 2019?