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Changes in Perceptions of George W. Bush's Personality in the Wake of the September 11 2001 World Trade Center Attacks

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Abstract

Using data gathered just before and just after the September 11th terrorist attacks, we examine how perceptions of Bush's personality changed in the following two weeks. Fifty participants provided ratings of Bush using the California Q-sort at various times before (including immediately before) and after the attacks. At each time interjudge agreement was strong. There was general consistency between the pre- and post-attack assessments, but the common view of Bush shifted in several important ways. Consistent with his soaring popularity, the changes were toward more positive perceptions, even for characteristics unrelated to the attacks. Findings are discussed in terms of possible mechanisms driving the changes in perception. These findings, which are based on careful assessments conducted shortly before the emergence of any hint of what was to come, provide a unique perspective on changes in Bush's image as they unfolded in the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks.

Key Words: 9/11, Bush, Personality, Q-sort, Perceptions.

Cambios en la Percepción de la Personalidad de George W. Bush posterior a los Ataques al World Trade Center el 11 de Septiembre de 2001

Resumen

Utilizando información recolectada justo antes y justo después de los ataques terroristas de septiembre 11 de 2001, se examinó cómo las percepciones de la personalidad de George Bush cambiaron en las dos semanas subsecuentes. Cincuenta participantes proveyeron puntajes sobre Bush utilizando el *California Q-Sort* en diferentes momentos antes (incluyendo el "inmediatamente antes") y después de los ataques. En cada momento temporal el acuerdo entre-jueces fue alto. Hubo consistencia general entre las evaluaciones antes y después de los ataques, pero la manera de ver a Bush tuvo cambios importantes en algunos puntos específicos. De manera consistente con su altísima popularidad, los cambios fueron hacia percepciones más positivas, aún en características no relacionadas con los ataques. Los hallazgos son discutidos en términos de mecanismos positivos que conducen los cambios en la percepción. Estos hallazgos, que están basados en evaluaciones cuidadosamente realizadas antes de siquiera haber tenido noción de lo que iba a suceder, proveen una perspectiva única de los cambios en la imagen de Bush tal y como se desarrollaron después de los ataques terroristas.

Palabras clave: 9/11, Bush, personalidad, Q-sort, percepciones.

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York on September 11th, 2001, it was widely observed that individuals, organizations, and governments rallied around then-President George W. Bush in a widespread show of support. Bush's approval rating skyrocketed to 90% following his declaration of war on terrorism (Moore, 2001). But how did perceptions of the president himself change? Upon the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, we examine their effects on specific perceptions of George W. Bush's personality.

We use data gathered just before and just after the September 11th attacks to document several specific changes in his perceived personality. These data help to explain this rise in popularity in terms of changes in how people perceive him (McAdams, 2011).

By chance, two days before the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, 14 American students in a personality assessment class described Bush's personality using a standardized rating procedure. Two weeks later, another set of 8 students assessed Bush using the same technique. These assessments, along with similar assessments collected in September of 1999 and 2000, provide a unique opportunity to examine the impact of recent incidents on perceptions of the president's personality.

Method

Participants

Fifty participants described the personality of George W. Bush as part of annual exercises designed to demonstrate the use of an in-depth personality rating procedure. Exact data on the age and sex of the participants is not known but they were drawn from a population with a mean age of approximately 20 years and in which 35% of the participants were male. The sample sizes across the four assessment periods were 11 (in September 1999), 17 (in September 2000), 14 (on September 9th 2001, before the WTC attacks), 8 (on September 24th 2001, after the WTC attacks).

Instrument

Participants independently rated the perceived personality of George W. Bush using the California Q-sort (CAQ; Block, 2008). The Q-sort consists of 100 small cards with a descriptive statement about personality functioning on each card; for example, card #1 is, "Is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed." Participants assigned each of the 100 personality-descriptive statements into one of nine categories, designated along a nine-step quasi-normal distribution from extremely uncharacteristic of Bush to extremely characteristic. In each of the four assessments, inter-judge agreement was strong, indicating that both before and after the attacks raters agreed on a reliable, common view of Bush's personality, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .86, .91, .77, and .87 for 1999, 2000, 2001 pre-WTC attacks, and 2001 post-WTC attacks, respectively.

Results and Discussion

There was general consistency between the pre- and post-attack assessments, but the common view of Bush shifted in several important ways. The specific patterns of change tell an interesting story. Table 1 shows all the descriptors that changed more than one standard deviation between the September 9th 2001 and September 24th 2001 assessments (Note, all changes tabled were significant at $p \leq .05$).

Table 1
Changes in Perceptions of Bush's Personality

| Characteristic | Mean Rating | | | | change | |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------|--|
| | 9 th Sept. 1999 | 24 th Sept. 2000 | 9 th Sept. 2001 | 24 th Sept. 2001 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Items rated as <u>more</u> descriptive on Sept. 24th | | | | | | |
| Enjoys aesthetic impressions (moved by art, music) | 4.55 | 4.47 | 4.07 | 5.25 | +1.48 | |
| Able to see to the heart of important problems; does not get caught up in irrelevant details | 5.27 | 5.00 | 5.36 | 7.00 | +1.27 | |
| Seems to be aware of the impression he makes on others | 6.64 | 6.18 | 4.71 | 6.63 | +1.22 | |
| Behaves ethically; has a personal value system and is faithful to it | 6.18 | 5.94 | 5.57 | 8.13 | +1.20 | |
| Is turned to or sought out for advice and reassurance | 6.00 | 5.47 | 5.21 | 7.25 | +1.06 | |
| Items rated as <u>less</u> descriptive on Sept. 24th | | | | | | |
| Characteristically pushes and tries to stretch limits and rules; sees what he can get away with | 5.00 | 4.88 | 5.86 | 3.50 | -1.46 | |
| Is subtly negativistic; tends to undermine, obstruct, or sabotage other people | 4.18 | 4.24 | 4.00 | 2.00 | -1.45 | |
| Feels a lack of meaning in life | 2.91 | 2.71 | 3.07 | 1.50 | -1.40 | |
| Is guileful, deceitful, manipulative, opportunistic; takes advantage of others | 4.91 | 5.24 | 5.57 | 2.88 | -1.36 | |
| Handles anxiety and conflicts by, in effect, refusing to recognize their presence | 4.82 | 4.59 | 4.29 | 2.75 | -1.23 | |
| Is self-indulgent; tends to "spoil" himself | 4.73 | 4.88 | 5.00 | 3.25 | -1.20 | |
| Over-controls needs and impulses; delays gratification | 4.64 | 4.71 | 5.29 | 3.63 | -1.11 | |

Table 1
Changes in Perceptions of Bush's Personality (continued)

| Characteristic | Mean Rating | | | | change |
|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------|
| | 9 th Sept. 1999 | 24 th Sept. 2000 | 9 th Sept. 2001 | 24 th Sept. 2001 | |
| Is self-defeating; acts in ways that frustrate, hurt or undermine chances to get what he wants | 3.27 | 2.88 | 4.07 | 2.63 | -1.02 |

Note. Change is shown in terms of Cohen's *d*, which reflects the ratio of absolute change to variability in ratings. All changes tabled are significant at $p \geq .05$.

Consistent with his soaring popularity in the opinion polls, all of the large changes (i.e., greater than 1 SD) were toward more positive perceptions of Bush. This shift occurred even for characteristics unrelated to the September 11th incidents or Bush's subsequent public behavior. In social psychology, this generalized acquisition of a suite of valenced (positive or negative) traits is known as the "halo effect" (Cooper, 1981; Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010). In Bush, the halo effect emerges in the increasing endorsement of descriptors such as "Enjoys aesthetic impressions (moved by art, music)," which were not particularly relevant to Bush's behavior and which are not consistent with archival analyses of Bush's enduring personality traits (McAdams, 2010).

Beyond a global halo, the specific changes in Bush's perceived personality could have arisen for three reasons. First, perceivers may have had difficulty interpreting Bush's actions. Immediately following 9/11, Bush was following a script for a leader in crisis – focused, reassuring, and uplifting – as well as receiving counsel from advisors, but those influences may have been difficult for perceivers to tell apart from authentic expressions of personality (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Second, Bush's situation could have given him the opportunity to express traits that not previously been obvious to the public. Just as glass can be considered brittle because it *would* break if struck, an individual can be considered courageous if he or she *would* exhibit courage should the opportunity arise. The events since September 11 could have given Bush the opportunity to show enduring but previously undemonstrated traits. Third, true personality change is likely to occur during major upheavals when an individual has direction and precedent for personal behavior (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993); in the short term after 9/11, both the leader-in-crisis script and a strong national sense of unity could have given Bush clear direction for how to act. For some combination of these three reasons, the raters' consensus view suggests that Bush was perceived to have responded to the attacks with integrity, insight, and sensitivity. The rise in salience of these traits largely wiped out the lingering perceptions of deceitfulness and rule stretching, presumably associated with the Florida election process, which previously characterized descriptions of him.

Previous attempts to characterize opinion shifts have had to rely on potentially biased retrospective analyses of the shifts, often over gradually

escalating situations. The present data are particularly interesting because they are based on careful assessments conducted shortly before the emergence of any hint of what was to come. As such they provide a unique perspective on changes in Bush's image as they unfolded in the two weeks following the terrorist attacks.

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