
Being Penn State: The Role of Joe Paterno's Prototypicality in the Sandusky Sex-Abuse Scandal

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More than any other man, Mr. Paterno is Penn State – the man who brought the institution national recognition, the man who built a football program based on honor for 46 years, the winningest football coach in Division I history . . . Paterno is at the core of the university's sense of identity. (Guarino, 2011, November 10)

We believe that Alderfer's (2013) intergroup analysis of the Penn State

scandal can be enriched by focusing on the special role that Joe Paterno played in the events leading up to the 2010 grand jury that brought the scandal to light outside the university community. On the basis of the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001), we argue that the community afforded Paterno the trust that he appears to have abused to suppress the scandal because he embodied the norms, values, and goals of Penn State in a way that made him prototypical of the university. By making the broader group category salient, Paterno was able to shape the behavior of representatives of many sub-groups described by Alderfer within the administration, athletics, and community. Coupled

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with a high degree of institutional ambiguity, Paterno's prototypicality likely enabled him to suppress the "constructive diversity" (p. 123) of checks and balances that should have operated at Penn State. This disruption to effective intergroup processes prohibited necessary oversight over the PSU athletic program and the Second Mile that otherwise might have uncovered Jerry Sandusky's crimes much earlier.

The Social Identity Theory of Leadership

Briefly, the social identity theory of leadership starts with the premise that people sometimes define themselves in terms of the groups they belong to, deriving value and meaning from that social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People are no longer guided by their own personal attributes, values, and interests when they identify themselves with a social group; rather, they are guided instead by the attributes, values, and interests of the collective. Groups, like Penn State, are cognitively represented by group members with prototypes that embody the ideal and defining characteristics of the collective (Lord & Brown, 2004).

The social identity theory of leadership further postulates that some individuals are seen by other group members as being similar to this group prototype (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). To the extent that an individual is seen as prototypical, he or she has the power to mobilize and influence other group members. This power develops because other group members trust individuals who are similar to the group prototype; they expect them to act in the group's interests, treat group members fairly, and achieve the group's goals, thereby strengthening the group and reaffirming the value of the group identity (Popper, 2011; van Knippenberg, 2011). Thus, group prototypicality enables a person to exert leadership influence over other group members, at least when a social identity is strong or salient (Ullrich, Christ, & van Dick, 2009).

The Social Identity Theory of Leadership in Action: Joe Paterno and Penn State

As Alderfer (2013) noted throughout his narrative, there is ample anecdotal evidence that Joe Paterno represented Penn State as a prototype, not just for the football program but for the university as a whole. For example, Paterno had become synonymous with Penn State athletics, the main library was renamed in his honor, and he became the "archetypal father" of the university (p. 120). Paterno's long legacy and many successes at PSU took on the quality of a "symbolic narrative" and became the ultimate embodiment of what PSU meant to high-identifying followers (Popper, 2011, p. 31; van Knippenberg, 2011). These actions to affirm and strengthen the PSU identity helped Paterno develop a wide base of support and charismatic attributions within the community that enabled him to operate very independently with minimal threats to his power (Haslam & Platow, 2001).

Consistent with the social identity theory of leadership, we argue that Paterno was able to make his own rules because members of the Penn State community assumed that such a highly prototypical group member would consistently act in the interests of the group and treat group members in a fair manner. Research indicates that prototypical leaders are able to bypass many of the formal procedures that would be important for establishing trust and credibility for a less prototypical group member (Ullrich et al., 2009). Accordingly, when Paterno failed—either as a football coach or as an ethical leader—he was repeatedly given the benefit of the doubt and was able to act in ways that would not have been tolerated by less prototypical group members (Giessner, van Knippenberg, & Sleebos, 2009). People clearly deferred to Paterno on critical decisions, even when it was clear that he was not behaving in ways that align with common leadership prototypes (c.f. Lord & Brown, 2004; Shondrick, Dinh, & Lord, 2010). For example,

Mike McQueary deferred to Paterno's decision to withhold his observations of Sandusky's probable child abuse to the police, a highly questionable decision that likely would have been challenged if made by anyone other than Paterno in the Penn State hierarchy (pp. 119–120). In addition, Paterno rejected a request to resign his position despite a series of losing seasons and a reasoned request from his ostensible superiors (p. 120). The fact that Paterno could act in these ways and exhibit behaviors consistent with ineffective leadership schemas became increasingly irrelevant given that group identity was highly salient; in these contexts, group prototypicality tends to override leadership prototypicality in affecting leadership evaluations (Hogg, 2001, p. 189). Thus, Paterno could be an objectively poor leader and still receive considerable trust, respect, and deference because of his high group prototypicality.

All of these effects posited by the social identity theory of leadership were exacerbated by a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the unofficial reporting structure of the university and the prospect of Penn State moving forward without Joe Paterno. Alderfer's narrative reveals that people were suspicious of Sandusky but uncertain of how to respond; the reporting and authority structure within the Penn State leadership hierarchy was unclear, and the inter organizational relationships and responsibilities between the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, The Second Mile, and PSU were nebulous. Research indicates that sources of ambiguity like these prompt a strong desire among group members to reduce their sense of uncertainty. Consequently, they are more likely to turn to highly prototypical leaders for guidance, giving these leaders even greater influence to wield (Cicero, Pierro, & van Knippenberg, 2010).

However, the conditions that enabled Paterno to exercise such broad influence rapidly disintegrated after the results of the grand jury investigation prompted widespread outrage outside of the Penn State community. The likelihood that

Paterno would lose his job and be disgraced prompted high-identifying Penn State students and alumni to defend him because they viewed him as an extension of their collective self. According to the logic of the social identity theory of leadership, group members will view threats to the position and morality of prototypical leaders as threats to the continuity and value of their collective as a whole (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Bobbio, 2008). Indeed, on November 8, the night before Paterno was fired by the Board of Trustees after they rejected a plan that would have allowed him to retire at the end of the 2011 football season, students and alumni rallied around his house. Their chants of "We are Penn State" illustrate that they saw themselves as defending the university, not just Paterno himself (p. 120). The next day, after Paterno was fired, PSU students fought in the streets with police and destroyed a news van that was present to enable reporting on the scandal to the outside world (Guarino, 2011, November 10). This too may illustrate the students' view that Paterno's finding was a challenge to the prestige of the university; Alderfer (2013) identifies protecting that prestige as "the most basic motive" of groups involved in suppressing the scandal (p. 128).

Conclusion

We agree with Alderfer (2013) that an intergroup perspective enriches our understanding of how different subgroups at Penn State suppressed information regarding Jerry Sandusky's abuse of young boys. Our analysis, rooted in the social identity theory of leadership, shares much in common with his analysis. We both argue, for example, that Coach Joe Paterno was able to overrule the formal hierarchy at Penn State by aligning himself with the history and values of the institution (pp. 128). We both argue, in addition, that the turning point in the scandal was when information about it spread beyond the boundaries of Penn State, a community beholden to Paterno's influence and

motivated by a desire to maintain the prestige of the university. Where Alderfer (p. 132) draws a distinction between an individual and intergroup understanding of the scandal, however, we draw a connection. When one person embodies the prototypical norms, values, and interests of a group, as Joe Paterno did at Penn State, he or she gains influence over other group members. This can be for the better; it allows leaders to take groups in new directions (van Knippenberg, 2011). At Penn State, however, it was for the worse; it allowed Joe Paterno to operate independently of the checks and balances that would otherwise have functioned within the university and likely brought Jerry Sandusky's crimes to light much earlier.

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