

Inside People: Experts weigh in on infidelity, lies and inflated egos

by Jenifer Goodwin

Politicians are certainly imaginative when it comes to their infidelities. You have your office romances (Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick), your restroom shenanigans (Idaho Sen. Larry Craig), your "Whoops! I'm really gay" flings (former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey) and your utterly inexplicable hanky-panky (Bill Clinton).

ELIOT SPITZER - Former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer's reputation for honesty makes the recent prostitution scandal that much more surprising. CNS Illustration. Eliot Spitzer, the former New York governor who prosecuted corporate corruption cases and prostitution rings as state attorney general, most definitely knew the consequences of such activities.

So as the nation collectively tried to pick its jaw off the ground after the revelation of "Mr. Clean's" alleged involvement with a call girl, you just have to ask: What could make a man with so much to lose do something so reckless? And how on Earth could he think he'd get away with it?

"Men who run for high office have perhaps an inflated ego," said Gloria Harris, a clinical psychologist and co-author of "Surviving Infidelity: Making Decisions, Recovering From the Pain."

"And that would correlate with the mistaken belief that they wouldn't be caught."

Garden-variety adultery among elected officials is a bit of a snooze these days. But this latest sex scandal sent tongues wagging around the water cooler here - while leaving many speechless in Albany, N.Y., and Washington, D.C.

"The thing that sets this case apart is that Spitzer built his career on giving the appearance of being totally honest," said Robert Feldman, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who

has researched why people lie.

"In this case, it's not just that he did something incredibly dumb, but that the kind of person he presented himself to be is so at odds with what he appears to be in reality."

In his research, Feldman has found that not only do people lie, they lie often about the mundane ("That dress looks great on you!") and the more serious, such as fudging on a resume.

"It's very rare we get caught in these lies," he said. "Our basic experience is getting away with things. Politicians who in the course of their profession find themselves lying and getting away with it, there begins to be a sense of invulnerability."

Spitzer is, of course, far from the first prominent personality who publicly said one thing while doing another behind closed doors. Certain personality types are masters at dividing their lives into good and bad parts and not being troubled by the contradictions.

With infidelity, men tell themselves that if they don't get caught, they are not harming anyone.

"They use rationalization and denial," said Rona Subotnik, a marriage and family therapist who co-wrote the infidelity book with Harris. "I can't tell you how many men have said to me, 'I didn't believe it would hurt her. It was just something I did when I was away. I didn't think it would have any effect on my marriage or my children because I love them.' "

Tell that to Spitzer's three daughters or his wife, who looked dazed as she stood with him when he announced that he had "acted in a way that violates my obligations to my family and violates my, or any, sense of right

and wrong."

Since the scandal erupted, Norma Jean Almodovar, a retired Los Angeles call girl and founder of the nonprofit International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education, is one of the few who isn't surprised by Spitzer.

"If I had a dollar for every politician, religious leader, business CEO or cop who visited a prostitute, I'd be very, very rich," she said.

The high cost of the service added to not only its mystique, but to the impression that it was exclusive and would protect its clients. "It's all about illusion and fantasy," Almodovar said. "It's about men who have money and power being able to have the best."

That drive, especially among those with narcissistic tendencies, can convince powerful people that they deserve more than others - even the right to ignore the rules everyone else should follow.

"It's easy to convince yourself you are owed something," Feldman said. "And it's easy to convince yourself of the truth of something even if it really isn't."

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