Why People Live With "Private Truths" Beneath Their "Public Lies"

Published on June 8, 2011 by [Douglas LaBier, Ph.D.](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/douglas-labier-phd) in [The New Resilience](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-new-resilience)

Pre-Reading questions:

1. What are some taboo topics? Things no one should talk about in public.
2. What makes this topics taboo? Explain.
3. What is something you would be cautious about sharing in public? Why is that?

The latest "sex and power" scandals flashing across the media in the last few weeks underscore just how commonplace, even repetitive, they've become. Some are new, like the sexual assault charges against former IMF President Dominique Strauss-Kahn, or Arnold Schwarzenegger's revelation that he had fathered a child with a former member of the household staff. Some are recycling, like John Edwards' indictment or Newt Gingrich's presidential aspirations, which revive memories about his lying about an affair while impeaching President Clinton for lying about an affair. The list goes on, the latest being the Anthony Weiner episode. The *Washington Post* recently compiled them into a [nice summary](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/post/political-sex-scandals-who-survives-who-crashes-and-burns/2011/06/05/AGZTRoJH_blog.html), for those who are interested in keeping track.

But I think this steady stream of sex-related scandals is just the most titillating and graphic part of something more widespread and troublesome in the lives of many men and women today: the gap between people's *public lies* and *private truths*.

That is, many people live with contradictions between their inner lives (the truths about their desires, emotional experience, self-image and ideals) and what they do with those truths behind the scenes, hidden from view (their private selves), and the lives they conduct publically, in their career paths, their relationships with their families or others they deal with and the positions they espouse or advocate (their public selves).

Public lies that contradict private truths have been part of our culture for some time. But in my work with people over the last few decades, I've seen it grow more rapidly since 9/11 and the economic/political events of the last few years. As I reflected on the reasons for this gap, how it damages people and our society, I was reminded of the Egyptian myth of Osiris. He was killed and dismembered, and each of the 14 pieces of his body parts was buried in different places. But then Isis, the wife of Osiris, collected the body parts and was able to put them back together. At that point, Osiris came back to life.

There's a relevant message for today contained in the symbolism of the Osiris myth, which I'll explain later. But first, take a look at the usual explanations of the most flagrant examples of the public-private gap, and what they suggest about power, success and social conditioning. The most common reasons offered by both media pundits and mental health professionals include the possibility that the power lust of people -- most often men -- and the enabling of sycophants around them loosen their control of impulses. Some [research](http://www.livescience.com/14199-arnold-schwarzenegger-cheating-psychology.html) even suggests that, as people rise in power, they're more likely to commit adultery.

In this view, as men rise in power, they have more opportunity to act on their impulses, and will do so. However, it's not clear whether such people had shaky impulse control to begin with. Perhaps the atmosphere and adulation around power and recognition fuels and reinforces nascent narcissism, like pouring gasoline onto a fire. But it's hard to say whether such people were narcissistic to begin with, or had tendencies that became strengthened and intensified by the perks and rewards of their situation.

Psychologically, high levels of success and power in business, politics, sports or entertainment can strengthen and fuel self-centeredness, at least. Environments in which you're often under public scrutiny can also feed heightened aggressiveness and a sense of entitlement, an attitude of "taking what I want, because I can," coupled with a belief that you can get away with it. Interestingly, [research shows](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110209105556.htm) that a higher level of testosterone, typical in aggressive, narcissistic, "Type-A" personalities, stifles the natural capacity for empathy. That's visible in people with power who use others for their own self-centered ends.

These are plausible explanations, per se, but the lives of a broader range of people who aren't politicians or celebrities also contain private truths and public lies, though less visible and less dramatic. In my view, a major source for those within that larger mainstream is found in how men and women become conditioned into what they think an adult life is supposed to be, or should be. And much of that originates in parental imperatives, whether overt or implied. The filmmaker Spike Lee described that in [a recent interview](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/post/spike-lee-dont-let-your-parents-kill-your-dreams/2011/06/05/AGUlAkJH_blog.html). He remarked on parents who "kill more dreams than anybody," those who push their children to opt for career security at the cost of pursuing their passions.

The heart of the deception many enter into is that you present yourself in one way in your public role, but feel or behave a different way, in private.

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**What type of article does this qualify as expository, argumentative, narrative? Why?**

**How does the concept of this article tie into *The Scarlet Letter*? Explain with character details.**