

Using the example of a single selected political leader, explore the potential of the ‘psychology of leadership’ in explaining how the responses, drives and decisions of leaders are influenced by the experiences of their past.

Introduction

For the purposes of this project, Joseph C. Rost’s definition of leadership will be used to define acts of political leadership. “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.” (Rost:1993, 102)¹. This definition is accurate as it distinguishes leadership from management, in that leadership involves change. It is applicable to the selected leader: Napoleon, for he intended and implemented real change in his relationship with followers in Egypt (1798-9) and France (1799-1815).

The definition of the ‘psychology of leadership’ used in this project shall be: attributes of the leader’s character shaped by past experience. The responses, drives and decisions will be explored separately, in order to address how they were influenced by past experience. The attributes of Napoleons character addressed within this study are: his tolerance, ruthlessness, rationality, ambition, pragmatism and favour toward autocracy.

The question will be answered in three sections: Napoleon’s responses, drives and decisions. In each of these sections Napoleon’s responses/decisions/drives will be analysed. The most significant past experiences will then be explored and explained with relevance to their import in affecting Napoleon’s leadership responses, decisions and drives.

Napoleon’s Responses

Napoleon’s responses were generally autocratic, and pragmatically based. He was able to make quick decisions in difficult situations, which he proved on the battlefield from an early age. However Napoleon often had several plans for each possible contingency. He knew fully well that events do not always proceed to plan, and hence could rationally re-assess his policy direction in response to new events. He responded without regard to morals. This has often resulted in accusations of “ruthlessness” (Haythornthwaite:1995, 350)².

Napoleon’s responses to financial shortage in Egypt evidence his ability to rationally re-access policies. In fiscal terms the policy of forced loans was beneficial, but it resulted in enormous harm to Napoleon’s reputation and credibility. “Bonaparte soon realized the damages these emergency measures were doing him, and feared also that his lieutenants might carry them to excess; less than a month later, he issued a formal order categorically prohibiting the exaction of contributions in cash.” (Charles-Roux:1937, 107)³. He recognized the policy’s unpopularity and was not too stubborn

¹ Rost, Joseph C. 1993. *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Praeger Publishers. P.102

² Haythornthwaite, Philip. J. 1995. *The Napoleonic Source Book*. London: Arms and Armour. P.350.

³ Charles-Roux F, translated by Dicks, E.W. 1937. *Bonaparte: Governor Of Egypt*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.107.

to adopt a different approach. He made an autocratic decision, but calmly, pragmatically and rationally.

This change of policy direction can be interpreted to evidence Napoleon's pragmatic responses. Learning from the past, Napoleon made a rational, pragmatic choice. This was a theme throughout Napoleon's responses. His rational choices were made without regard to morals in any leadership response or decision.

This ruthless disregard for morals was felt by subordinates. Menou (a subordinate to Napoleon in Egypt) disputed with Napoleon over the morality of many of his actions. The fact that a subordinate recognized, and was willing to dispute this approach with Napoleon, is evidence of how firmly Napoleon believed in the logical, rational approach over one set by morals.

Many past experiences could be linked to this preference for rationality over morality. But the influence of role models, particularly his mother, was chief among these. "The really important parental influence came from his mother." (McLynn:1998, 13)⁴. Napoleon's mother (Letizia) was strong willed and often pursued her goals irrelevant of who would get hurt.

Letizia was not moral, and therefore failed to give her children a sufficient moral upbringing. It is widely believed among academics that Napoleon knew of his mother's long affair with Marbeuf (a Corsican politician and associate of her husband). Napoleon was beaten by Letizia, and would often be sent to bed without meals, due to her preference to spend the money elsewhere. Napoleon's father, Carlo, also suffered from a lack of morals and principles but it was Letizia whom Napoleon sought to emulate.

Napoleon admired and respected his mother in the same way he sought to be admired and respected by followers. He slowly adopted his mother's ruthless responses as later experiences seemed to enhance their logic.

Napoleon's early Corsican roots are also a cause of Napoleon's ruthlessness, pragmatism and faith in brute force. "The Corsican legacy may partly account for the ruthless pragmatism in Napoleon's personality, the impatience with abstract theory and the conviction that, ultimately, human problems are solved by main force." (McLynn:1998, 11)⁵. Napoleon was prepared to go to almost any length so long as the result was beneficial to his goals.

Jean Tulard and Philip Haythornthwaite also both agree that Napoleon had a ruthless character and pursued his aims rationally. The adoptions of these rational, ruthless responses were confirmed with the onset of the revolution. "At all events the factors which determined Napoleon's rallying to the revolution were material rather than ideological. In order to support his family, now in Marseilles, he was obliged to resume his army service." (Tulard:1984, 42)⁶. Napoleon had to take a large amount of responsibility onto his shoulders at the early age of sixteen. Napoleon's circumstances

⁴ McLynn, Frank. 1998. *Napoleon A biography*. GB: Pimlico. P.13.

⁵ McLynn, Frank. 1998. *Napoleon A biography*. GB: Pimlico. P.11.

⁶ Tulard, Jean; translated by Waugh, Teresa. 1984. *Napoleon The Myth of the Saviour*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.42.

became very difficult, both financially and socially, following the death of his father. Responsibility and 'material' needs forced Napoleon to hide many of his emotions and do what he must.

These rational responses were all driven by ambition. For example Napoleon's response to attempted assassination in 1804 was to claim more power by crowning himself Emperor.

Napoleon's Drives

The most significant factor driving Napoleon was pure ambition. His successes, failures and lack of focus elsewhere also provided motivation but ambition was always the over-riding drive. Napoleon believed he was destined for greatness, and openly admitted to having unlimited ambition.

All credible scholars accept that Napoleon was driven by ambition. "It seems in reality that Bonaparte saw in the conquest of Egypt the first condition and the first phase of a vaster and more grandiose project, never elaborated in concrete detail in his mind, but aiming at creating in the eastern Mediterranean, through his transformation of that region, a formidable diversion in the conflict between republican France and monarchical Europe." (Charles-Roux:1937, 82-3)⁷. Charles-Roux here clearly believes Napoleon's ambition was enormous.

Ruthless decisions made in the pursuit of power evidence Napoleon's ambition and the incredible drive it gave him e.g. Napoleon's decision to abandon his army in Egypt in 1799. Ambition drove him to make nearly all his leadership choices, and enabled the ruthlessness that marked Napoleon's leadership style of decision-making. It was a consistent drive throughout life. He would not give up his pursuit of power even after abdication to Elba in 1814.

Past experiences were influential in determining Napoleon's drives. "Albert Bandura and Richard Walters [*Psychology: An Introduction*] have shown that behaviour is learned not only by conditioning but by imitating persons with whom the learner identifies and whom he takes as models." (Burns:1979, 63)⁸. Napoleon's parents, chiefly his mother, and Paoli (a Corsican nationalist) became these role models. Parental influence throughout Napoleon's first nine years was the most significant determinant of Napoleon's drives.

Napoleon's mother craved power. "Letizia was a fearsome martinet with a rather masculine nature and a natural love of power." (McLynn:1998, 8)⁹. As stated earlier, Letizia took any opportunity she could to dominate her children, and Napoleon admired this quality in her. Napoleons father (Carlo) not only enjoyed, but actively pursued power. "Carlo Buonaparte's aspirations to noble status" (McLynn:1998, 5)¹⁰ were to become Napoleon's exact motivations, and his pragmatic methods were also

⁷ Charles-Roux F, translated by Dickes, E.W. 1937. *Bonaparte: Governor Of Egypt*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.82-3.

⁸ Burns, James. MacGregor. 1979. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. P.63.

⁹ McLynn, Frank. 1998. *Napoleon A biography*. GB: Pimlico. P.8.

¹⁰ McLynn, Frank. 1998. *Napoleon A biography*. GB: Pimlico. P.5.

similar. Indeed, after the accusations aimed at Carlo for abandoning the idea of Corsican independence, Napoleon too was to abandon it, in favour of greater power in France. After Carlo passed away, Napoleon elevated Paoli to a father figure. "In Napoleon's mind Paoli took on the proportions of a Plutarchian hero; he exalted him without even having known him." (Tulard:1984, 27)¹¹. It became natural for Napoleon to adopt a drive present in all of his early influences.

Napoleon's ambition grew throughout his life, particularly after the death of his father. He responded to severe depression by throwing himself into his studies. "With the death of his father [in 1785, when Napoleon was aged 16] and with four children under ten still at home, the financial embarrassment of the family increased despite the fact that the Bonapartes continued to occupy a high social position in Corsica" (Tulard:1984, 26)¹² which also needed to be upheld. The great needs presented at this time, in turn furthered his workload, and ultimately his ambition. Using Barber's leadership analysis, it is this workaholic attitude and ambitious nature that made him an active-negative leader. (Barber:1992)¹³.

Ambition oriented drive linked with rational and ruthless responses meant that Napoleon was prepared to make ruthless decisions in the pursuit of autocratic power.

Napoleon's decisions

Napoleon's decisions were similar to his responses. He displayed tolerance and rational thinking. However ruthlessness was also a key theme of Napoleon's decision-making.

Tolerance was displayed in religious policies, particularly in Egypt. "To convince the Mussulmans [Muslims] of Egypt of the benevolence of his intentions, genuine as it was; to declare and prove it to them, this was the essence of Bonaparte's religious policy. Never did a European colonizer have better intentions or more publicly and categorically declare them" (Charles-Roux:1937, 46)¹⁴. The neutrality of this source could be questioned. However Napoleon was true to his word, and proved it in protecting Muslim pilgrimages and caravans travelling through Egypt. In France too, the Concordat (agreement between Napoleon and the Pope, effective from 1802) restored the church and allowed freedom of worship for other religions e.g. Judaism. Indeed Pope Pius VIII himself thought Napoleon was tolerant (Geyl:1949,113)¹⁵.

Many studies of Napoleon, e.g. Stiles, p.92, Palmer, p.91 and Tulard, p.99 recognize his ability to be tolerant. It is the reason behind his tolerance that is disputed. As Stiles's, Palmer's and Tulard's arguments present, it seems Napoleon's motives were

¹¹ Tulard, Jean; translated by Waugh, Teresa. 1984. *Napoleon The Myth of the Saviour*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.27.

¹² Tulard, Jean; translated by Waugh, Teresa. 1984. *Napoleon The Myth of the Saviour*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.26.

¹³ Barber, James. David. 1992. *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

¹⁴ Charles-Roux F, translated by Dickes, E.W. 1937. *Bonaparte: Governor Of Egypt*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.46.

¹⁵ Geyl, Peter; translated by Renier, Olive. 1949. *Napoleon For and Against*. London: W.Bain & Co. Ltd. P.113.

rational and ambitious, just as were his responses and drives. Why however, did Napoleon perceive the most rational choice to be tolerance?

The import of learning was a key influence in Napoleon's religious policies. "The force that may be the most important in shaping most leaders: learning. Learning from experience, learning from people, learning from successes and failures, learning from leaders and followers: personality is formed in these reactions to stimuli in social environments." (Burns:1979, 63)¹⁶. Extensive reading, particularly in philosophy and religious texts, influenced his decisions on the import of religious tolerance.

The readings of particular influence were the Koran and literature written by Volney. Reading the Koran led to Islamic sentiments. Volney's work was influential as Napoleon was anxious to avoid Volney's prediction of the hardest struggle for control of Egypt being with Islam. Charles-Roux agrees these readings were influential in shaping Napoleon's decisions regarding religion (Charles-Roux:1937, 70)¹⁷.

Napoleon was an avid learner and learned many lessons throughout his career. He saw Islam becoming a source of opposition in Egypt, just as he began to see signs of Catholicism becoming a source of opposition in France. Hence his experience with religious policy making in Egypt was to help decision making when dealing with the Pope and Catholicism.

Experience in dealing with Islam taught Napoleon that both toleration and ruthlessness were needed. "The first native associated with the French in their government betrayed them; the first application in Egypt of the policy of association resulted, within less than a month, in treason." (Charles-Roux:1937, 45)¹⁸. Experiences such as this taught Napoleon that compromise and tolerance were not always effective. He drew the lesson that to be respected, as he had respected his mother, was better than to seek love, as he secretly craved. He also became more autocratic from traitorous experiences such as these.

Just as influences made in childhood had a dramatic impact upon responses and drives, so too were they significant upon Napoleon's decisions. A ruthless, rational approach to decision making lay behind the policy of religious tolerance. It stemmed from the examples set by role models such as his mother.

Conclusion

Napoleon's leadership style has since been classified as 'Bonapartism'. It was a strong, authoritarian, autocratic rule in which decisions were made rationally without regard to morals, but incorporative of certain revolutionary principles e.g. freedom of worship.

This leadership style was shaped by Napoleon's complex character. His character was formed as a result of genealogy, skills and combined life experience.

¹⁶ Burns, James. MacGregor. 1979. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. P.63.

¹⁷ Charles-Roux F, translated by Dickes, E.W. 1937. *Bonaparte: Governor Of Egypt*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.70.

¹⁸ Charles-Roux F, translated by Dickes, E.W. 1937. *Bonaparte: Governor Of Egypt*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. P.45.

Past experiences do influence leader's decisions, responses and drives. All aspects of Napoleon's character can be linked significantly to experience in early childhood. "In all cultures the origins of political attention and comprehension lie largely in the early childhood years." (Burns:1979, 81)¹⁹. Napoleon's childhood was the most significant influence upon his leadership style, decisions, responses and drive. The actions of Napoleon's mother had the greatest import as a role model in these early years.

However, other factors also had an impact. Among these were: reading, learning from success and failure, and the circumstances in which Napoleon lived. There are thousands of other experiences which also impacted upon Napoleon's leadership style but it would be impossible to incorporate these into one study.

The problem of judging the extent to which past experience influences leadership is interpretation. What one scholar deems to be an influential experience in a leader's life, another might think insignificant. Hence the precise influences of each experience cannot be judged but informed guesses can be made.

The potential of the 'psychology of leadership' in explaining how the responses, drives and decisions of leaders are influenced by the experience of their past is therefore significant. This approach can be used to explore the motives behind a leader's actions and gain an insight into how he/she adopted certain leadership characteristics. However the use is limited and cannot be considered entirely accurate.

¹⁹ Burns, James. MacGregor. 1979. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. P.81.

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