

What we can learn about the congressman—and about human sexuality—from his ill-advised photographs.

By Laura Kipnis

Rep. Anthony Weiner admits during a press conference sending risqué photos

Exhibit A: A photo of a man with an erection thinly concealed behind gray boxer briefs. The photo is obviously taken by the man who is portrayed. He's the auteur—scriptwriter, stage manager, costume designer, and star. Every element in the photo is there by his design.



So what exactly are we looking at? To begin with, at an oscillation between concealment and exposure: The erection is apparent but not fully visible; the body is exposed, but the face isn't. He could have snapped the photo in a mirror, as auto-pornographers often do, but he chose not to, even though he wasn't concealing his identity. Who is this man? Someone for whom excitement is defined by taking risks, and who's staged this performance for that purpose. It wasn't contrived for the ostensible recipient of the photo alone, obviously, or the rest of us wouldn't be looking at it now. In other words, we're watching a performance that turns on a sort of pun: The man is exposing himself to expose himself. (As I write, a new photo *sans* boxer briefs is making the rounds, upping the stakes even further.) Danger is sutured into the photo. It didn't come later, after the (inevitable) public outing, hasty lies, and eventual *mea culpa*; it was there all along. As with the erection, the danger was apparent but not fully visible. Let's say it was hidden in plain sight.

How much do we really know about the vast array of oblique purposes to which people apply their erotic capacities, drives, and appetites? Our information sources are limited. The early attempts to catalog the range of sexual variance came largely from psychiatrists and doctors, notably Freud, though as a practicing clinician, his sample group was limited to the cure-seekers who presented themselves at his consulting room door. Later generations of sex researchers widened the data pool with large-scale surveys but were limited by the notorious unreliability of sexual self-reporting. In the supposedly authoritative 1994 survey by the National Opinion Research Center, 64 percent of the male sexual activity reported couldn't be correlated with the female sexual activity—or rather it could if, in a pool of 3,500 responses, 10 different women had each had 2,000 partners they didn't report. In other words, these numbers make no sense. If you're going to investigate sexual behavior, clearly the least effective method is asking the participants.

Which is why sex scandals are so socially useful—here's a ready-made trove of data about what people *really* do behind closed doors. So instead of decrying scandal, why not treat it as a research archive? Of course what's here is the raw material: What it all means is left for us to construe. Once again, the participants themselves are useless; when asked to explain themselves, their answers are inevitably bland and generic. As we saw with our latest scandal victim, Anthony Weiner, the above-mentioned auteur. "I don't know what I was thinking," he said, after finally admitting he'd sent the incriminating photos. "This was a destructive thing to do." "If you're looking for some kind of deep explanation for it, I simply don't have one."

Fair enough. Anyone in possession of a libido probably has some experience of the deep fissures between brain

and groin, and how carefully these must be monitored to avoid personal catastrophe. Still, the general view is that when the brain suspends operations, it's in the pursuit of pleasure. "I just wasn't thinking" is the customary code for "I decided to stop thinking in order to have some fun." So what are we to make of those who use sex in ways that are guaranteed to produce unpleasure—national humiliation and possible job loss? When we look at the snapshots Anthony Weiner sent his online pals and, indirectly, the rest of us—what *are* we looking at?

I know what you'll say: at a guy and his erection. But according to psychiatrist Robert Stoller's *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, which explores the aesthetics of erotic fantasy, every erection tells a story—by erection he means both male and female arousal, by the way. (Women are capable of [acting out sexually, too.](#)) An erection isn't a physiological fact alone; it's a narrative event. It's the culmination of a fantasy, comprised of "meanings, scripts, interpretations, tales, myths, memories, beliefs, melodramas, and built like a playwright's plot, with exquisite care, no matter how casual and spontaneous the product appears." Nothing is left to chance: "[E]very detail counts." Even when it seems unplanned or spur-of-the-moment, erotic excitement is a series of aesthetic choices, and we return to them again and again, like a habit.

When the sex photos surfaced last week, and Weiner was still maintaining that his Twitter account had been hacked, he tried to brush the whole thing off as a joke on his name. While denying to CNN's Wolf Blitzer that he was responsible for sending the photos, he repeatedly linked his name to the mysterious hacker's purpose: "When you're named Weiner, this happens a lot." "When you're named Weiner, it goes with the territory." By my count he mentioned his name five times in the space of a four-minute segment. "We have to get to the bottom of this," he added, repeating the sentiment at least six times.

And so now we have. Or sort of—what no one understands are Weiner's motives, such intense stupidity from such a very smart guy. But perhaps the motives, too, are hiding in plain sight? "When you're named Weiner, it goes with the territory." As *USA Today* reiterated in an [article](#) about the name jokes, "With a name like Weiner, it was just a matter of time before the adolescent humor got out of hand." You can't help wondering what it was like growing up [with that name](#), what sort of playground mockery was involved. If the recent media coverage is any indication, it must have been damaging in all sorts of ways—names *are* our identities. Then why set himself up for a reprise of adolescent humiliation?

According to Stoller, the experience of humiliation plays a larger role in erotic life than we like to think. What looks like risk-taking sexual behavior—exhibitionism is the example he uses—is a way of attempting, unconsciously, to transform those early humiliations into triumphs. The risk taker seeks out dangerous situations as a proving ground, to measure his success in avoiding an even greater risk: humiliation. But what's concealed is far more crucial: the mark that humiliation has left on erotic life. It's a treacherous strategy: The real-life consequences can be devastating. In Weiner's case, rather than converting humiliation into any sort of triumph, he's succeeded only in reliving it, and quite possibly worse.

Still, I'm going to make a sweeping claim: The dialectic between exposure and concealment in the Weiner scandal offers us a way of conceptualizing the ever-growing archive of politician sex scandals—the nonstop parade of highly accomplished men performing acts of breathtaking self-destructiveness in public. Just as it was impossible that a congressman sending lewd pictures under his own name wouldn't soon be exposed, it was impossible that *any* of the crop of recently humiliated politicians wouldn't be exposed, from Clinton, to Edwards, to Vitter, to Spitzer, and so on. Punishment was inevitable. What we're looking at, in other words, is a species of male masochism.

But this isn't an individual diagnosis; it's a cultural one. Men being flailed in public has become a dominant trope in our political sphere, with excruciatingly real-life spectacles of self-destruction playing out in the headlines, courtesy of a scandal-hungry media in collaboration with individual propensities for risk-taking and humiliation. And there seems to be no end in sight.

What is it with these guys? Or to put it another way: What does it mean to be a white male in power at this moment in history? In one of the photos Weiner sent to an online pal, he's pointing to himself while holding up a handwritten sign with an arrow pointing to himself, labeled "Me." It's as if he's picking himself out of a lineup.

For what crime? There are so many to choose from. The story of male power has been under revision for some time now. Watching men in power use their positions of power to take themselves down is just the latest twist in a still-unfolding story. Will trauma finally be converted to triumph? It seems not.