

Narcissist-in-Chief

December 1, 2016

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A Psychological Take on a Political Reality

By Alfie Kohn

Reporter: What do you think people will take away from the [Republican National] Convention? What are you hoping?

Donald Trump: From the convention? The fact that I'm very well liked.

– *New York Times*, July 21, 2016

The initial shock has given way to a twofold horror. First, there is the unavoidable fact that more than 62 million Americans voted for this man. Most white college graduates preferred him. Most white women preferred him. Presumably many of those 62 million aren't bigots or bullies or sexual predators or compulsive liars. But they knowingly voted for someone who is all of those things and more.

And then there are the sickening practical implications. During the campaign, novelist Adam Haslett remarked that "endless acts of verbal violence shock us into stunned passivity so we no longer register the horror of what we're living through." But that's nothing compared to the horror fatigue that awaits us under a Trump administration. His election – along with Republican control of both Houses of Congress and more than two thirds of state legislatures – will almost certainly precipitate an assault on civil rights, civil

liberties, environmental protections (including a reversal of early, tentative steps to deal with global climate change), consumer protections, reproductive rights, gay rights, workers' rights, prisoners' rights, humane immigration policies, aid to the poor, gun control, antimilitarism, support for public education, and on and on. It will be bad enough for an individual deeply committed to any one of these issues; for those interested in all of them, it will be difficult to absorb, let alone summon outrage about and become active in opposing, a tidal wave of reactionary policies likely to continue on a daily basis for many years.

The potential impact on official policy is staggering. And yet I can't stop thinking about the man himself.

All through the campaign, I found myself looking through a psychological lens at Trump's behavior, not only appalled at the bellicose, racist pronouncements about, say, Mexicans or Muslims, but riveted by the deeply damaged human being who was saying these things. Even before he ran for president, Trump had been Exhibit A for the axiom that it's possible to be rich and famous without being a successful human being, psychologically or morally speaking. To flesh out the details now that we're more familiar with him is to add a layer of disbelief and dismay to the reality that so many people voted for him anyway. This psychological perspective is also critical for trying to predict just how much damage he will do to the country and the world, particularly to those who are most vulnerable.

Donald Trump has distinguished himself as someone who is:

- * given to boasting, preening, and swaggering to the point of self-parody;
- * not merely thin-skinned and petulant but vindictive when crossed or even criticized;
- * restless, with the attention span of a toddler;
- * desperately competitive, driven to sort the world into winners and

losers, and to regard other people (or countries) primarily as rivals to be bested;

* astonishingly lacking not only in knowledge but in curiosity;

* not merely given to uttering blatant falsehoods on a more or less constant basis but apparently unaware of the extent of his dishonesty, as if the fact that he believes or has said something makes it true; and

* possessed of a sense of absolute entitlement – such that if he wants to kiss or grab an attractive woman, for example, he should of course be free to do so – along with a lack of shame, humility, empathy, or capacity for reflection and self-scrutiny.

Even if you set out to consider different sorts of deficits, you're pulled back to the psychological issues. It's not just that he's ignorant or even incurious; it's that he seems incapable of acknowledging that there's something he doesn't know. It's not just that he lacks the cognitive wherewithal to view himself as others view him (or to reflect on his failings) but that his psychological makeup is such that he can't bear to stop and think about who he is; he's like a shark, a blind eating machine that must always move forward or die. Similarly, while his speech rarely ventures beyond elementary-school vocabulary or grammar, what's more alarming than his cognitive limitations is his egocentrism. One careful analysis found that he inclines not only to the monosyllabic but to the megalomaniacal: The single word he uses more than any other is "I" – and his fourth-favorite word is his own name.

Donald Trump seems to me a textbook illustration of how a lifelong campaign of self-congratulation and self-aggrandizement (acquiring as much as possible and then pasting his name on everything he owns) represents an attempt to compensate for deeply rooted insecurity. He fears being insignificant, worthless. In fact, his quest to humiliate and conquer, to possess and flaunt, may be strategies to prove to himself that he really exists, reflecting a condition that R.D. Laing called "ontological insecurity" (in a chapter of that

name in his classic book *The Divided Self*). He doesn't even bother – or maybe just lacks the sophistication – to conceal how desperate is his craving for attention and approval, how precarious is his mental state.

Why did Trump praise Putin? Well, he explained, it was simply because Putin “has said nice things about” him. And the entire spectacle of his party's convention was a \$60 million attempt to prove that he personally was well-liked. If you watch the man carefully, before he lashes out at a critic, before the outpouring of blind rage, insults, and threats, there seems to be a moment of genuine perplexity and hurt that anyone could say something about him that isn't complimentary. The vulnerability, the naked need, would almost occasion our pity were it not for the potentially catastrophic consequences when someone with this profile is in a position of power.

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The fact that Trump is basically, in the words of comic commentator Samantha Bee, “an oddly tinted compilation of psychiatric symptoms,” has hardly been a secret. Psychobiographies have been published in *The Atlantic* and at book length. In *Vanity Fair*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Huffington Post*, clinicians and other observers have specifically focused on the extent to which he likely suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). These pieces are worth reading, but it's possible just to take a quick look at the **official criteria for NPD** and come away with the uncanny impression that those who defined the pathology were profiling Trump (although, interestingly, one key definer *demurs*).

This is not someone who is merely narcissistic in the colloquial, casual sense of the term, meaning that he's selfish or self-centered. This is someone with a psychiatric disorder in all its flagrant, florid particulars. To grasp its seriousness is to be staggered that someone too disordered and rancid to be a trustee of your condo association will be running our country. How is it possible that almost half the voters, even those who like his values

and disliked his (conventional politician of an) opponent, could have listened to him taunt and lie and bully his way through a campaign and then said, “Yep. That’s who should be in charge of the country”?

The implications going forward are nothing short of chilling. It’s not just how little he knows but how little that fact bothers him – the overweening arrogance that leads him to believe he has nothing to learn, that he knows “more about ISIS than the generals do.” It’s not just that he’s an extreme risk-taker, but that he takes those risks purely in the service of his own wealth and glory. It’s not clear that he has any principles, as such; what he has is an overwhelming need to be the center of attention, to be liked, feared, admired. Apart from considerations of **personal profit**, his foreign policy is likely to be determined at least in part by **which individuals on the world stage stroke his ego and which ones criticize him** – never mind that despicable leaders may do the former and reasonable leaders the latter (which is actually more likely than the reverse, if you think about it). [Addendum, February 2017: Yup.]

His hunger for approval means he’s likely to keep surrounding himself with those who tell him what he wants to hear and flatter him – the engine of Shakespearean tragedies. His belligerence and volatility, that hair-trigger temper, are the last qualities you want to see in someone holding a position of power, particularly when they’re coupled with a childish us-versus-them view of the world: xenophobic nationalism and compulsive competitiveness. His disorder leaves no room for consensus and collaboration. How can one not tremble at the thought that someone like this will command the military and have access to nuclear weapons?

Is this sort of analysis, focused on psychopathology rather than just politics, just as relevant to a Putin, an Erdogan, a Duterte? Maybe. But those names, and others that come to mind, actually prove the point. A list of narcissistic heads of state, as psychologist **Nigel Barber observed**, consists mostly if not exclusively of dictators. People like that tend to be “screened out by democratic

systems of government.”

This, then, is the bottom line: Trump has little understanding of, commitment to, and (psychologically speaking) capacity for democratic decision-making. And that’s been clear from the start. In his convention speech, he said, “I alone can fix” our country’s problems. [Addendum June 2018: After meeting North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, Trump admiringly commented that Kim is the “strong head” of his country, adding, “He speaks and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same.”] As author Masha Gessen put it: “Trump is the first candidate in memory who ran not for president but for autocrat – and won.” He won not in spite of that fact but, frighteningly, because of it. Social scientists discovered that the best predictor of who supported Trump wasn’t economic deprivation (for example, having one’s job shipped overseas) but a predilection for authoritarianism – an extreme need for order, a fear of the Other, an attraction to strongman leaders. (Another significant predictor of who was drawn to him, incidentally, was hostile sexism.)

We find ourselves facing a future so treacherous that pundits are reduced to hoping that Trump’s psychological disorder can be manipulated. Maybe rather than being committed to right-wing ideology, he’ll “tilt in whatever direction, and toward whichever constituency, is the surest source of applause,” offers columnist Frank Bruni. Sane people – say, those who would like to save the planet or avoid war – need only clap their hands if Trump should happen to tweet something that isn’t insane. A slender reed for hope indeed, particularly as he surrounds himself with right-wing ideologues.

That pretty much leaves us relying on legal challenges (until the appellate courts and Supreme Court are repopulated), protests to pressure lawmakers capable of responding to reason, and, should it come to this, mass civil disobedience and disciplined noncooperation with efforts to round up immigrants, create a registry for people of a disfavored religion, and who knows what else. Have I overlooked other realistic strategies? Lord, I hope so.

Some years ago, I urged my fellow educators to put aside their various pet projects for improving schools and make common cause to challenge high-stakes standardized testing, which threatens all our priorities. Now all of us face a similar challenge, but writ large, well beyond the field of education, and with far higher stakes. People in all fields, with a range of causes (including those listed in the second paragraph of this essay), must join hands to deal with a shared threat.

And we must do so while taking care not to become inured to the magnitude of that threat, determined to resist accepting it as the new normal. On his HBO show, John Oliver urged us to keep reminding ourselves, “A Klan-backed misogynist Internet troll is going to be delivering the next State of the Union address. This is not normal.” Furthermore, we’ll need to remember that what’s abnormal here isn’t just a set of positions and policies but the psychological state of the person who will be in charge. The clearer our understanding of that, the better our chances for protecting one another – and our democracy.

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