

Donald Trump: Narcissist, Psychopath or Representative of the People?

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ABSTRACT *Donald Trump's detractors have called him a sociopath, psychopath, and narcissist, or as having an anti-social personality disorder. To his supporters he is a charismatic representative of the people. This article looks at the precise definitions of some of these terms and makes use of the available collateral information to make a tentative diagnosis of Donald Trump. It then considers the extent to which Donald Trump's personality traits may be an issue should he become president. Although concluding Mr Trump's behaviour could be detrimental not just to the United States, but also to world stability, this article moves on to consider whether he is the main problem, or merely symptomatic of a much bigger, global shift towards more extreme politics that is actively seeking destabilisation of the current political and economic elite. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The colourful display of vitriol, inconsistencies, racism and grandiose rhetoric from the US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump throughout his campaign has led the media to seize upon the possibility he may be mentally disordered in some way and, as such, unfit to govern. He has variously been called a psychopath, sociopath, and narcissist, or viewed as having an anti-social personality disorder, by his detractors (Berger, 2016; Olbermann, 2016; Williams, 2016). However, for his supporters, the same behaviours make him a charismatic, straight-talking representative of the people (Bucktin, 2016; Frank, 2016).

So what do these psychological diagnoses actually mean, what relevance do they have in making predictions about Trump's likely efficacy as president, and how can such a personality seemingly resonate so deeply and positively with such a large swathe of the American population?

Firstly, let's consider the terminology. Psychiatrists draw their diagnoses in large part from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), a manual and classification which includes a number of personality disorders, of which anti-social personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder are two. The term psychopath is a classification derived from the field of forensic psychology, and has been defined by Hare (1980) through his development of the Hare Psychopathy Checklist

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(*PCL*), of which there are two current versions, the revised version (*PCL-R*) (Hare 1991) and the screening version (*PCL:SV*) (Hart & Wilson, 2008). The term sociopath is a media-friendly label, but whilst used for many years by various professionals, it has no specific psychiatric or forensic definition. Although varying slightly, the psychiatric term “anti-social personality disorder” broadly aligns with the forensic term “psychopathy”. Whilst all of these terms have their critics, as many argue such traits lie on a broad continuum of different clusters of behaviours (see, for example, Walters, 2004), the *PCL-R* and *PCL:SV* continue to be used to assess criminal psychopathy.

The *PCL:SV* (Hart & Wilson, 2008) consists of 12 items which are assessed using collateral review and a structured interview format, although an assessment can be made with collateral information alone. These items are:

1. Superficial
2. Grandiose
3. Deceitful
4. Lacks remorse
5. Lacks empathy
6. Doesn't accept responsibility
7. Impulsive
8. Poor behavioural controls
9. Lacks goals
10. Irresponsible
11. Adolescent antisocial behaviour
12. Adult antisocial behaviour

The items are of a standard format with the assessor rating the participant on the strength of credible evidence for or against the items using a three-point ordinal scale (0, 1, 2) with total and two-factor scores produced. Factor 1 items are from 1-6 and Factor 2 items 7-12. The score range is 0-24. A psychopathic diagnosis would be confirmed for any score above 17.

Donald Trump's history is littered with law suits against his failed companies for which he does not take responsibility, for example, the Trump University (Manhire, 2016); grand statements with questionable substance, for example, that global warming is a hoax propagated by the Chinese, or his insistence Mexico will pay for the proposed wall marking the border between the US and Mexico (Manhire, 2016); categorical statements later denied (numerous examples are outlined by Holan & Qiu, 2015; a noted refusal to apologise for any wrongdoing, such as his racist and sexist comments (Buchanan, 2016); and threats of violence, such as his reaction to protestors at the Democratic National Convention, and violent insinuation towards Hilary Clinton (Levingston, 2016). The cited newspaper articles above provide many more examples for each of the checklist items.

This collateral evidence suggests, therefore, that Donald Trump would be likely to score at least 18 on the *PCL:SV* and, with more information, could score more. Psychologists George Simon (David, 2016a) and Dan McAdams (Berger, 2016) have similarly made a diagnosis of psychopathy for Donald Trump.

So what is the difference between psychopathy/anti-social personality disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder and, in Trump's case, why does this matter?

Although there is a significant overlap in behavioural characteristics, Millon and Davis (2000) suggested that the easiest way to distinguish the two disorders was on differences in intent and need for approval (see also Vaknin, 2014). They described how the narcissist's "abusive conduct is off-handed and absent-minded, not calculated and premeditated like the psychopath's". They also noted how "psychopaths really do not need other people while narcissists are addicted to narcissistic supply (the admiration, attention, and envy of others)" (Millon & Davis, 2000, p. 65).

So is Donald Trump deliberate in his abuse of others or is it accidental? That he has been given many public opportunities to apologise for his abusive behaviour but has refused to do so, suggests the former. However, his sensitivity and extreme reactions to criticism suggest a pathological need to be seen in a favourable light. It thus seems reasonable to suggest that, based on the available information, Donald Trump is likely to fulfil the criteria for psychopathy with additional narcissistic traits.

Trump's supporters may argue that to make such an assessment without meeting the man, or knowing how he works in more detail, is unprofessional or even unethical but, as noted above, such an assessment can be made on collateral information alone. Further, such a diagnosis has significant implications for his likely behaviour in office and is, therefore, in the public interest. Thus, on the basis of this assessment, given his actions to date, it seems likely if Trump became president he would:

- Find it easy to abuse this power – he has already threatened to make it illegal for the media to criticise him harshly (David, 2016b).
- Not stick to the recommendations of his advisors – he has stated previously that "My primary consultant is myself" (North, 2016).
- React strongly, possibly violently, to perceived threats or slights from other agencies, be they individuals, groups or countries – at one rally, he stated about a protester "I'd like to punch him in the face" (Stein & Liebelson, 2016).
- Be inconsistent and impulsive in his decision-making – he once presented three different views on abortion in eight hours (Timm, 2016).
- Make promises that he would not keep – exemplified by the promises he has already made to investors over many years, only for these businesses to fail (Thompson, 2016).
- Lie to defend his status and position – Politico measured the number of lies Donald Trump told over 4.6 hours of speeches, concluding that, on average, he lied once every five minutes (Berrien, 2016).

Clearly, having a man with these traits in a position of immense power could endanger us all. However, what may be more uncomfortable to consider is how many powerful politicians around the world already demonstrate exactly these traits. Indeed, in their book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*, Babiak and Hare (2006) have noted how pervasive such traits are in the corporate world, as these personalities are motivated by power over others and therefore often end up in powerful positions.

So, if Donald Trump is a more extreme version of some other politicians and a risk to the stability of the world if he were handed the reins of power, why are so many people likely to vote for him?

It has been argued by some that Donald Trump's vitriol is resonating with people due to deep-seated racial hatred within the American people. For instance, in a recent article in the *New York*

Times, Thomas Egan (2016) stated: “Donald Trump’s supporters know exactly what he stands for: hatred of immigrants, racial superiority, a sneering disregard of the basic civility that binds society”. His view is that Donald Trump is simply the mouthpiece of this hatred, and that he can be the mouthpiece because his irreverence towards the political system allows him to say what other politicians will not.

However, this simple explanation seems to miss a crucial element, namely the personal reward for individuals in lending their support. Racism is a projection onto others, but what does it say about the self?

In a recent article in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, Thomas Frank (2016) noted how Donald Trump’s support seems to be correlated with areas of America that are experiencing “deindustrialisation and despair”. He argued that voting for Trump is voting against the “CEO who fired you or wrecked your town”; in other words, voters are getting back at the wealthy elite. In this sense, the fight is not about racism, but rather it is focused on providing a sense of hope for personal prosperity, with a tinge of revenge. Donald Trump seems to be offering this group the ability to challenge the political status quo and the elite who control it. What is ironic is Trump himself could easily be described as one of the elite, a point which reinforces the notion that, for some, voting against traditional politics is more important than voting for Trump.

This theme of disenfranchisement with and rejection of neoliberal politics run by the political and economic elite who have lost touch with the “common man” appears to be a developing global phenomenon rather than merely an American one. It has, for example, been espoused as the reason behind the relative ease with which Westerners are persuaded to fight for ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) (McCoy, 2014, June), and the rise of the Far Right in many countries in Europe (Gutteridge, 2015; Henley, Bengtsson, & Barr, 2016). Further, as whole cultures are displaced across the world, the pressure for resources and land becomes clearer, bringing into stark focus the failings of the current political and economic systems as the divide widens between the small number of haves and an increasing number of have nots.

Whilst individually Trump is undoubtedly a huge risk for the world should he get into power, sadly he seems to represent, rather than be the problem. The real issue we are all facing is the realisation that the lives of billions on this planet have been blighted by the pathological needs of the elite few, that neoliberalism has failed, and those millions are now starting to fight back.

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