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The Problem of Pathocracy -

Do psychologists have a responsibility to help prevent ruthless amoral people attaining position of power?

In communist countries, psychology could be a dangerous profession. As with any role, if you didn't use your expertise in service of state propaganda, you were in danger of fouling fall of authorities. The Polish psychologist Andrzej Lobaczewski was persecuted especially harshly, since the focus of his research was political power, and how it can be misused.

After spending his early life suffering under the Nazis, and then under the Soviet rule of Stalin, recognised that ruthless and disturbed individuals - like Hitler and Stalin - were strongly drawn to political power, and often constitute the government of nations. He began to study the relationship between power and personally disorders - like psychopathy - and coined the term 'pathocracy' to describe the phenomenon. As he put it, pathocracy is a system of government 'wherein a small pathological minority takes control over a society of normal people.' Since he was living under a 'pathocratic' regime himself, Lobaczewski took great risks studying this topic. He was arrested and tortured by the Polish authorities, and unable to publish his life's work, the book *Political Ponerology*, until he escaped to the United States during the 1980s.

According to Lobaczewski, the transition to pathocracy begins when a disordered individual emerges as a leader figure. While some members of the ruling class are appalled by the brutality and irresponsibility of the leader and his acolytes, his disordered personality appeals to some psychologically normal individuals. They find him charismatic. His impulsiveness is mistaken for decisiveness; his narcissism is mistaken for confidence; his recklessness is mistaken for fearlessness.

Soon other people with psychopathic traits emerge and attach themselves to the pathocracy, sensing the opportunity to gain power and influence. At the same time, responsible and moral people gradually leave the government, either resigning or being ruthlessly ejected. In an inevitable process, soon the entire government is filled with people with a pathological lack of empathy and conscience. It has been infiltrated by members of the minority of people with personality disorders, who assume power over the majority of psychologically normal people.

Soon the pathology of the government spreads amongst the general population. As Lobaczewski wrote, 'If an individual in a position of political power is a psychopath, he or she can create an epidemic of psychopathology in people who are not, essentially, psychopathic' (2006, p.

25). The pathocratic government presents a compelling simplistic ideology, promoting notions of future greatness, with a need to defeat or eliminate alleged enemies who stand in the way of this great future. The government uses propaganda to stoke hatred towards enemies, and to create a cult of personality around the leader. In the general population, there is an intoxicating sense of belonging to a mass movement, inspiring loyalty and self-sacrifice. Present sacrifices become immaterial in the movement towards a glorious future. In addition, the mass movement inspires acts of individual cruelty, including torture and mass murder.

Once they possess power, pathocrats usually devote themselves to entrenching, increasing and protecting their power, with scant regard for the welfare of others. However, Lobaczewski also noted that pathocracies never become permanent. At some point, they are destined to fail, because their brutality and lack of moral principles are not shared by the great majority of the population, who are psychologically normal, possessing empathy and conscience. This was certainly true of the two pathocracies that Lobaczewski himself experienced, Nazi Germany and the communist regime of Poland.

Power and Pathology

While reading the above description of how pathocracies develop, it's difficult to avoid reflecting on the four years of Donald Trump's presidency in the United States. Psychologists and other mental health professionals are justifiably reluctant to make judgements about the mental health of public figures. Many are careful to follow the 'Goldwater Rule' - the convention of the American Psychiatric Association that it is unethical for psychiatrists to voice their professional opinion about public figures without examining them in person. However, many psychologists and other mental health professionals felt compelled to voice concern about Trump. For example, the psychologist John Gartner formed the 'Duty to Warn' organisation, which declared that Donald Trump 'suffers from an incurable malignant narcissism that makes him incapable of carrying out his presidential duties and poses a danger to the nation.' The president's niece, Mary Trump – herself a clinical psychologist – also stated her belief that the president suffers from malignant narcissism, and possibly other conditions such as sociopathy and dependent personality disorder.

Whether these psychologists were right to speak out or not, it's easy to identify many of the elements of pathocracy in Trump's presidency. For example, there was certainly an exodus of conscientious figures from the administration, the Whitehouse officials who initially saw themselves as 'the adults in the room' but were soon replaced by loyalists. Trump's simplistic 'make America great again' agenda is certainly an example of promoting a notion of future

greatness. Other pathocratic aspects are his demonisation of ethnic and religious groups, and the appeal his impulsive narcissistic personality to a large section of the US population.

But is there any hard evidence that people with personality disorders - or more specifically, with psychopathic and narcissistic traits - are attracted to political power, as Lobaczewski suggested?

Let me begin with a caveat. I'm somewhat reluctant to use labels like 'psychopath' or even to speak in terms of specific disorders like psychopathy or narcissistic personality disorder. My view is that - partly as a result of books like Hare and Babiak's *Snakes in Suits* and Jon Ronson's *The Psychopath Test* - the term 'psychopath' has been bandied around too freely. There has been a tendency to think of psychopaths as a distinct group, like alien beings who are walking secretly amongst us. It's similar to Phillip K. Dick's famous novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (later adapted as the film *Blade Runner*). In the novel, androids have been created who are almost impossible to distinguish from real human beings. They look and act perfectly normally, with the exception that - like people with psychopathic or highly narcissistic traits - they lack empathy. They can't form emotional connections, can't sense other people's feelings or see the world from other people's perspective. The protagonist of the novel, Rick, is a kind of detective who is employed to find androids. He gives people empathy tests to ascertain whether they are androids, and kills them if they fail the test. It's almost possible to conceive of a 'psychopath hunter' who would work in a similar way, including the use of an empathy test (but perhaps not going to the extreme of killing).

Of course, the reality is not as clear cut. It's obviously more sensible to think in terms of a continuum or spectrum. On the positive side of the continuum, there are people who are relatively free of psychopathic traits like ruthlessness and cruelty, and also free of the traits associated with narcissistic personality disorder, such as grandiose self-importance and a sense of entitlement. Such people have a high level of empathy and compassion, and often act selflessly, for the benefit of others. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are people who possess strong psychopathic and narcissistic traits, who are unusually ruthless and self-centred, and lacking in conscience and empathy. You could even go to the extreme of letting go of terms like psychopathic and narcissistic altogether, and just speak in terms of people who abnormally ruthless, self-centred and lacking in empathy and conscience.

In addition, rather than viewing such traits as wholly innate, one should consider that the traits may be enabled and encouraged by our social values and institutions. In hierarchical non-egalitarian societies, where power is unevenly distributed, it is perhaps inevitable that some individuals develop a sense of superiority and privilege, and tend to oppress and exploit others. This relates to the suggestion by some theorists that leadership positions *in themselves* increase narcissism. Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011) have described this in terms of a 'leadership trap.'

Once they attain positions of power, leaders begin to think of themselves as superior and special. Although they may owe their own success to the combined efforts of the group they have emerged from, the leader figure is 'singled out' for credit and admiration, which feeds their narcissistic tendencies and ultimately undermines the group's success.

With all of that said, there certainly is evidence for the link that Lobaczewski suggested between pathology and political power. First of all, there is a good deal of evidence that people with psychopathic and narcissistic traits (or people who are just ruthless and lacking in empathy and conscience, if you prefer) are attracted to high status positions. Many psychologists have suggested that, as Steffens and Haslam summarise, 'like moths to a flame, narcissists may be drawn naturally to positions of power and influence and that, once there, their narcissism will tend to be accentuated by the opportunities for self-advancement that high office affords' (2020, p.3).

According to some psychologists' estimates, around 1% of the general population exhibit psychopathic traits (Neumann and Hare, 2008; Coid *et al.*, 2009). However, Babiak and Hare (2006) have claimed that the figure rises to 3-4% in senior business positions (hence their term 'snakes in suits'). Other estimates are slightly higher. For example, in a survey of the work experiences of Australian white-collar workers, Clive Boddy (2011) concluded that 5.6% were presently working under a psychopathic supervisor. Studies have also suggested that students with psychopathic tendencies are highly concentrated in business and commerce degrees (Wilson and McCarthy, 2011; Hassall *et al.*, 2015).

In recent years, the concept of a 'dark triad' has gained prominence, focusing on the 'socially aversive' traits of psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). According to Pauls and Williams, although the traits are distinct constructs, they overlap to such an extent that they should be studied in combination. Research suggests that the 'dark triad' is strongly associated with a desire for dominance and power, and is significantly more common than normal at the level of upper-level management and CEOs - psychopathy and Machiavellianism, in particular (Hodson, Hogg, and MacInnis 2009; Jones and Figueredo 2013; Lee et al. 2013).

All of this certainly suggests that the values and structures of modern capitalist-individualistic societies *favour* psychopathic and narcissistic traits. In hierarchical societies where ruthless competition and even exploitation are condoned, people with high levels of ruthlessness and a lack of empathy are bound to thrive, since they are more manipulative and exploitative than others, and are unconstrained by feelings of guilt or conscience.

It would not be surprising to find that such individuals are attracted to political positions too. After all, the role of politician offers the opportunity to exercise power very directly, and confers prestige, attention and potential wealth. As Hare has put it, 'Psychopaths are social predators and

like all predators they are looking for feeding grounds. Wherever you get power, prestige and money you will find them.' A recent study of 157 leaders (from 81 worldwide elections from 2016 to 2019) found 14 'strongman' leaders with pronounced autocratic tendencies, all of whom scored significantly highly on the 'dark triad' traits, especially in psychopathy (Nai & Toros, 2020).

The ex-politician and medical doctor David Owen - working with the psychiatrist Jonathan Davidson - developed a construct of a personality disorder that he termed the 'hubris syndrome,' which he believed heads of government are especially prone to. Owen and Davidson posited 14 characteristics of the hubris syndrome, most of which overlap with psychopathy and narcissistic traits. (In fact, Dr. Owen suggested that the syndrome could be seen as a sub-type of narcissistic personality disorder.) However, there are also criteria that specifically apply to politicians, such as 'exhibits messianic zeal and exaltation in speech,' 'conflates self with nation or organisation,' 'displays the unshakable belief that he will be vindicated in that court' and 'displays incompetence with disregard for the nuts and bolts of policy-making' (Owen & Davidson, 2009). Owen & Davidson suggest that these traits arise from the leadership role itself, along the lines of the 'leadership trap' I described earlier. At the same time, they suggest that such leaders were originally attracted to power by their narcissistic traits. Once in power, the traits became intensified and distorted, sometimes partly through the intake of alcohol and performance-enhancing drugs (Owen & Davidson, 2007).

Regulating Power

Since there does appear to be a link between the 'dark triad' traits and political power, then surely the attainment of political power needs to be more strictly regulated. Or to put it more neutrally, since ruthless, narcissistic people with a lack of empathy and conscience seem to be attracted to positions of power, surely we should take some measures to restrict their access to power.

To an extent, this has also been the purpose of democracy. As Ian Hughes points out in his recent book *Disordered Minds*, the aim of democracy is to try to protect the mass of people from disordered authoritarian leaders. This is why, as Hughes also points out, authoritarian leaders with psychopathic or narcissistic traits distrust democracy. Once in power, they do their utmost to dismantle and discredit democratic institutions, including the independence of institutions and the freedom and legitimacy of the press. Moreover, such leaders are unable to comprehend the principles of democracy, since they regard themselves as superior, and see life as a competitive struggle in which the most ruthless deserve to dominate others.

One can see that, even over the course of Trump's tumultuous presidency, US democracy held firm, and prevented him from taking autocratic control of the country. However, even

countries with the most developed democratic processes (such as the US and the UK) are presently unable to prevent ruthless and narcissistic individuals gaining high level political positions. The problem is that, while democratic systems provide checks and balances that limit the power of potential tyrants, they do little to prevent such people attaining power in the first place.

Like other psychologists who have studied the problem of 'corporate psychopathy,' Clive Boddy has suggested that companies should 'screen leadership candidates for psychopathy because organisational success and psychopathy are inimical' (2017, p. 156). And surely we need to do something similar in politics. As Lobaczewski (2006) noted, pathocracies only emerge because we do not take sufficient measures to protect ourselves from a pathological minority with an intense desire for power.

Anthropological reports of hunter-gatherer groups who live an 'immediate return' way of life - meaning that they consume their food almost straight away, without storing surpluses - have typically shown them to be extremely egalitarian and democratic. In the words of the anthropologist Knauff, such groups are characterised by 'extreme political and sexual egalitarianism' (1991, p. 391). They have well developed processes of maintaining social harmony, including measures to ensure that unsuitable individuals do not attain power. Any person who shows signs of a desire for power and wealth is usually barred from consideration as a leader. In the words of the anthropologist Christopher Boehm (1999), contemporary hunter-gatherer groups 'apply techniques of social control in suppressing both dominant leadership and undue competitiveness' (p. 64). If a dominant male tries to take control of the group, the group practise what Boehm calls 'egalitarian sanctioning.' They gang up against the domineering person, ostracise him or desert him. As Boehm has noted, 'This egalitarian approach seems to be universal for foragers who live in small bands that remain nomadic' (1999, p.69).

Our societies clearly require some measures of egalitarian sanctioning too. Most importantly, I believe we should follow the example of hunter-gatherer groups in attempting to limit the access to power of individuals with high levels of the 'dark triad' traits. And this is where the expertise of psychologists and other mental health professionals would be essential. In my view, every government (and indeed every organisation) should employ psychologists to assess the personality and behaviour of potential leaders, and hence determine their suitability for power.

Of course, there are a variety of inventories to assess for psychopathy and narcissistic personality disorder, but since people with such traits are frequently manipulative and dishonest, it is unlikely that self-report inventories will be reliable. But a wide variety of other assessments could be implemented. There could be 'observer ratings' from a variety of sources, including previous supervisors and co-workers. Beyond inventories, psychologists could examine the candidate's life

history, looking for evidence of empathy and compassion (or their reverse). They could interview past acquaintances, former school teachers or university tutors, and so on.

It is widely accepted that there are early life predictors of psychopathic traits, such as callous-unemotional traits, a lack of empathy and guilt, and shallow or deficient emotions (Salekin, 2006, Frick, 2009, Glenn, 2019). In the light of this, early teachers and childhood friends or relatives of political candidates could be interviewed to examine evidence for these traits. Of course, all of the above types of assessments could be manipulated too, but a range and variety of assessments could provide a broad and detailed picture of the candidate's personality, and their suitability for a political position.

I admit that the above proposals are problematic and may appear naive. I admit that I do not have a clear strategy on how we could assess potential leaders, or how such assessments could be implemented. More than anything, I would simply like to start a debate about the issue.

One criticism might be that the above proposals give too much power to psychologists, who would effectively become kingmakers, and perhaps themselves become vulnerable to corruption and narcissism. This is true, but it is surely much less hazardous than the present situation, when there are no safeguards at all on people who put themselves forward for positions of political authority. As a friend of mine remarked recently, we live in societies where you need to pass a test to drive a car, but you don't need any training or test to drive a whole country. Anyone is free to put themselves into seats of political power, and it is all too often the most reckless and ruthless people - the most dangerous drivers - who occupy them.

Other measures are essential too. Empathic and conscientious people should be encouraged to take up positions of power, and perhaps measures such as sortition and nomination could be more widely used. In ancient Athens, the cradle of modern democracy, the practice of sortition was common. Officials and assembly members were chosen by lot, as a means of ensuring that ordinary people were represented in government, and of safeguarding against corruption and bribery. Such a measure would also, more broadly help to safeguard against pathocracy.

Deeper social and cultural issues also need to be addressed. The frequency and ease with which people with psychopathic and narcissist traits rise into positions of power suggests deep-rooted problems with our social institutions and values. These encourage competition and selfishness, and devalue compassion and empathy, enabling people with ruthless amoral traits to thrive, and facilitating the development and expression of such traits. We clearly need to develop more egalitarian and responsible values and institutional structures so that such traits become less socially acceptable and desirable.

In the same way that corporations are badly damaged by the behaviour of a small number of disordered individuals in high positions, our whole societies - and the whole of the world itself - are

being badly damaged by the actions of a small number of disordered politicians in positions of high power. And more than anyone else, psychologists and other mental professionals have a moral duty to help.