

Donald Trump and the Success of the Narcissistic Sociopath

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Psychological studies and evolutionary biology show that an overconfidence and brash leadership style is both dangerous—and can work.

While the rest of the country was either recovering from a tryptophan-induced coma and/or raiding department stores at odd hours to score deals in the time-honored American post-Thanksgiving tradition of Black Friday, President Donald Trump was—as usual—tweeting.

Trump's tweet sparked mockery, derision, and outcry, along with a [clarifying tweet from Time](#) that suggested no such conversation took place. But that single tweet is evocative for more than representing Trump's outsized view of himself and his role in the world; it demonstrates elements of sociopathy and narcissism that the leader of the free world—and his peers in his previous life as a business mogul—showcase.

But why do those with sociopathic characteristics succeed? The answer is a complicated one that's fascinated both organizational psychologists and business analysts for a long time. And it traces back to a story of men, narcissism, an obsession with power, and a quirk in the brain that makes it frighteningly simply for some people to not feel empathy.

Which raises the necessary question: What is a sociopath? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, commonly referred to as the [DSM](#)—the guidebook of the [American Psychiatric Association](#)—[classifies sociopathy as an antisocial disorder](#), or having a general “disregard for and violation of other people's rights.” It goes on to dictate the characteristics we are familiar with for representing these disorders: callousness, hostility, deceitfulness, lack of remorse, egocentrism.

Importantly, sociopathy is a result of environmental factors. Sociopaths have become cold and manipulative as a response to trauma: physical, mental, and/or social abuse that made them resistant to trust, erratic in their behavior, even violent.

But wait, doesn't this armchair sort of diagnosis of Trump's mental state break the sacred [Goldwater Rule](#), the American Psychiatric Association's ethical rule to avoid diagnosing a person with a mental condition (here, sociopathy)? The Goldwater Rule was put in place to not only avoid politicizing the psychiatric profession but also to maintain a sense of integrity for a person's wellbeing and their health. While the stigma of being associated with a mental illness has certainly gone down, mental illness still considered by many to be something shameful. And how can one rightly diagnose a person without actually, physically interacting with them?

The psychological (not psychiatric, importantly) experts The Daily Beast spoke to—along with a [number of practicing psychiatrists](#)—have suggested that Trump's years of media output—books, television appearances, tweets, and more—made his case one that is jarringly different, and one in which the Goldwater Rule doesn't apply.

What Trump's relentless output of media suggests, from his youthful days conquering the New York real estate market to his vociferous campaign, is one truth: The traditional rules of diplomacy don't apply to him, and his style of leadership relies on an overwhelming, overpowering self-confidence that he's the smartest, most able man in the room. [He grabbed pussy, he equated Mexican immigrants with rapists, he blamed his poor performance at a debate to a moderator's menstrual cycle.](#) None of that stopped Trump from getting elected, and in the year since his election, Trump's consistent belief in his moral superiority has driven his tenure and policies.

There's something to say about a person with a deluge of optimism in their abilities to lead, unfounded or not. While it might seem that being preternaturally overconfident and reckless in wielding power for power's sake would be dangerous, evolution seems to indicate otherwise. In 2011, evolutionary biologist Dominic Johnson traced the [evolution of overconfidence](#), or narcissism, with game theory, suggesting that the boost of overconfidence that some people seemed to have about their abilities worked as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. It might seem like magical thinking, but the fact is that while narcissism can drive leaders towards wars, financial collapses, and self-delusions about how much they can influence policy, a mild sense of delusion about one's abilities can be a good thing.

That's because game theory experiments showed that opponents weren't sure how to read a person's narcissism. Was it an empty threat? Was it real? Was the boy who called wolf actually calling wolf? Competitors often didn't know and resorted to believing their opponent's big claims, even if they weren't true.

Ashley Watts is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Emory University. For the past six years, she's studied the [intertwining of narcissism and sociopathy of men in power](#). In 2012 and 2013—the advent of President Barack Obama's second term—she and her fellow researchers considered what makes for a successful presidency from a psychological standpoint. She found that what makes these leaders especially compelling and just plain good at what they do is a serious dose of grandiose narcissism.

“That's what people are thinking when they think about narcissism,” she said. “It's the extroverted, boisterous, self-focused, interpersonally dominant person who is fearless and persuasive.” The lack of empathy combined with the tendency to act impulsively with a streak of antisocial behavior is far more common than we might at first assume. “Those aspects overlap a lot,” she said, “and together they can create a person who is very charming.” While it might seem odd that a person who is deemed antisocial could simultaneously be considered charming, it's really not, Watts argued: Antisocial narcissists are attuned to when and how to turn the charm

factor up to manipulate a person to do something or feel like they've earned the praise they crave from that person.

The channeling of narcissistic antisociality into something useful is defined as adaptive, where a person is able to use the aspects of both character types to fearlessly dominate meetings, make hiring and firing decisions without remorse, and lead groups into directions a person without this unique duality of personality traits would find uncomfortable at the very least, frightening and anxiety-ridden at the worst. "In moderate levels and certain occupations, those are adaptive traits," Watts pointed out. "Even a little dose of those features makes you a better leader."

Which is why presidents can often exhibit the important narcissistic tendency of fearless dominance. In a study she and her colleagues did in 2012 analyzing presidents up to and including President George W. Bush ([PDF](#)), Watts found that what was often deemed negative with regards to sociopathy and its very close genetic cousin psychopathy, objective surveys of presidential performance found that the presidents that were able to wield power with these traits were considered [more effective and successful](#). "There are certainly presidents who rank high [in narcissism], and it's possible to have both [narcissism and antisociality]," she pointed out.

That's the key part of narcissistic sociopathy that Watts emphasizes: If you are a maladaptive narcissist and had nothing to your personality, than being able to channel those traits into effective leadership is next to impossible. [Charisma is the magic ingredient](#), and being able to manipulate people into believing you are a force for good or right goes a long way towards cementing a narcissistic person's path to power.

[Elizabeth Lunbeck](#), a professor of the history of science at Harvard, wrote the book on narcissism of men in leadership, penning not only the book [The Americanization of Narcissism](#) but also an [essay](#) in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* this past August reflecting on Trump's narcissism now that he occupies the Oval Office. She thinks that in the last year, strides have been made in pushing narcissism out of its narrow—and often wrong—[association with Millennials](#).

"Until recently, it was the narcissistic Millennial [that dominated the conversation about narcissism], that they refused to grow up," Lunbeck said. But that's not true. She noted that Trump's year has illustrated narcissism's negative effects and how those effects differ from narcissism's positive qualities.

That's right: Narcissism's negative connotation isn't entirely true. "What I think is missing most from the conversation is the idea of healthy narcissism," Lunbeck pointed out. Studies have repeatedly shown that there's a reason why narcissism is a helpful character trait to have: The ability to be calculating, know when to assign tasks to certain people, and make decisions devoid of empathy or personal ties to the subject can seem cold, but it makes for a leader that's capable of executing

difficult decisions and propel an organization forward—whether that be the White House or a storied Hollywood production house.

Lunbeck says the idea of the charming narcissist is very plausible in real life boardrooms and at the height of power in any industry. “We’re attracted to narcissists because they’re glittery, they’re glitzy, they’re charismatic, and they make us feel good,” she explained.

That’s actually the paradoxical part of narcissists: We might feel like they’re outright assholes, people we’d rather not deal with because they’re slimy and/or heartless, but we chase them in search of validation. Lunbeck says narcissistic psychopaths ability to “fatten us up and get us ready for the kill” highlight their leadership potential and also showcases how they’re able to lasso in our weakness as humans to try to get people to be pleased with our work and like us. It’s apparent in cycles of abuse—“Even if someone has been really hurt by others or a lover or a boss, it’s not unusual for that person to be found in that same sort of scenario again—a sort of Stockholm syndrome where those manipulated by narcissistic psychopaths are held prisoner to their pursuit of feeling appreciated and valuable, despite the very people they seek validation from not caring about their wellbeing so long as the job at hand is done. “There’s no all-purpose prophylactic about fighting oneself from the spell of a narcissist,” Lunbeck said.

[Dan P. McAdams](#), a psychology professor at Northwestern University, wrote a widely shared [article](#) on *The Atlantic* before the 2016 election titled “The Mind of Donald Trump,” in which he analyzed Trump’s behavior from the countless hours of media available to the public.

McAdams’ specific focus on Trump has shown that indeed, he illustrates narcissism “that we’ve never seen in our lifetimes, that we may never see again.” Early signs of this was slapping his name onto buildings and products; McAdams says this behavior continues now with his inability to apologize for missteps. What McAdams sees as even more threatening and potentially psychopathic is the idea that he was elected president despite the now infamous *Access Hollywood* tape that caught Trump on a hot mic bragging about grabbing women without their consent.

“When it comes to sexual predators and men who are in power and abuse their power, this has always been with us,” McAdams said. “But now, it’s becoming a big deal.” That person in power who takes advantage of his vantage point to coerce people into doing their bidding without their consent might seem inhuman, and to McAdams, that’s because it is—he said the closest anagram to Trump was the “alpha chimp form of leadership.”

But what does this show us about narcissistic, antisocial men in power? All three of the experts on male narcissism that talked to The Daily Beast agree that while we might have gained a social awareness of the dangers of this predatory, abusive power, the year since Trump’s election and the subsequent fall from power of men who have ruined the lives of many women and men has also shown that these

people thrive off of power and are far more ingrained in our society than we might have guessed. “You can’t change them right away, they don’t become shrinking violets overnight,” McAdams said. “People get drawn to them because they have that captivating power.”

The narcissistic male argument, however, has one critical sample bias flaw: It could be so because that’s all we’ve ever really known. The vast majority of cultures have emphasized male dominance and rewarded men with power over women for most of time. That means our understanding of narcissistic sociopathy is limited to men, Watts said.

That doesn’t mean that women are incapable of being narcissists to the point of sociopathy, though. But it does illustrate why there seems to be a prevalence of this type of behavior outside the Oval Office, why Trump’s tweets are indicative of a deeper, ingrained leadership style that’s only recently come to the throes of public conversation about men in power. Would a woman complain about “probably” not being selected to being *Time*’s Person of the Year? Maybe. But what Trump’s tweet—indeed, his tweets, *plural*—illustrate vividly is the fact that narcissism can fuel a person to power and allow him to make wild, often treacherous, statements, that root back to one thing: a ruthless, dangerous hunger for power that is willing to put anything and anyone at stake, that is sociopathic and potentially fatal to democracy.