Donald Trump: A Construct of Narcissism

According to George Kelly, humans construct schemas, or unique ways of seeing the world, based on our experiences in life and the way we anticipate events; we develop our perspective on how the world works based on what we observe throughout our lives, starting at birth. Imagine, then, what your construct would look like if you were born into a wealthy family, given everything you wanted, sent to expensive private schools, allowed special exceptional privileges like escaping the military draft or being awarded a college degree despite not having the grades to earn it. Such a life, such a combination of experiences, could reasonably become a schema that results in an attitude of entitlement, inflated ego, low empathy, and other traits that can easily result in living your whole life being handed everything and treated like you deserve the world simply for existing.

If, as Kelly speculated, we construct these observations similar to the way scientists develop their theories, then Donald Trump’s theory that he was indeed special, better than everyone else, and deserved everything was proven true over and over again throughout his life each time he was handed something simply for being a privileged white man. Such experiences and conclusions drawn from them are a recipe for narcissistic personality disorder, which Mr. Trump very likely meets the DSM-5 criteria for; evidently it is very common among people in prominent leadership positions. As put by O’Reilly & Chatman in their article about such narcissists:

“They are grandiose, entitled, self-confident, risk seeking, manipulative, and hostile. […] [narcissists] have an inflated sense of their own importance, a view that they are entitled—not subject to the normal rules and norms—and superior to others, a need for admiration, extreme self-confidence, a willingness to exploit others for their own ends, and showing hostility toward those who challenge them.” (O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020)

Watching basically any interview or video of Trump gives a perfect example of exactly what that looks like. He is hostile to anyone who disagrees with him, going so far as to mock and threaten his dissenters, even those who just ask him perfectly reasonable questions about his policies or actions. He defies rules and norms at every turn, because his schema and life experience has shown him that they do not apply to him; he is exempt from regular presidential limitations and regulations, such as using an unsecured personal device on the Whitehouse network (which, strangely, he could not seem to stop berating Hillary Clinton for doing…once).

Unfortunately, it seems like the world has largely allowed him to ignore his failures (including six bankruptcy claims, being sued over 4000 times, and numerous sexual assault allegations) and float his inflated ego all the way to the Oval Office, where the intense spotlight upon him showed just how little substance and competent ability he actually possesses. Over a period of 1055 days in office, he made over 15000 false or misleading claims (O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020), likely because his construction corollary has proven to him that the truth is whatever he says it is. He cannot stop boasting about his victories and accomplishments, even when they are quite verifiably untrue or entirely unrelated to the context at hand.

Narcissists are also frequently extremely charismatic and outwardly likeable when they want to be, which is how this individual who sounds so concerning on paper managed to make millions of people worldwide like him so much they thought he would be a good choice to lead the entire country. He was sure to be personable and engaging at his rallies, exploiting his supporters in just the right ways to make them feel important and superior like him.

From the view of the Big Five, a narcissist would typically display low agreeableness, and high neuroticism which is covered by high extraversion. According to Dr. Kristy Lee Hochenberger:

Narcissists are generally identified as encompassing the traits of dominance, grandiosity, self-absorption, combativeness, and exploitativeness. […] Individuals with high extraversion are also found in leadership roles or other self-bestowed places of power and direction. They may not have earned the position, but they strongly feel they deserve it no matter what. Extraverts who also embody other narcissistic traits will most likely surround themselves with people who are easily influenced and bullied or are otherwise non-confrontational. […] Those with low agreeableness scores are reported to be rude, callous, and manipulative as well as combative and defensive. (Hochenberger, 2020)

Again, these traits are very clearly displayed by Mr. Trump at every turn. There is an *entire book* in which 27 psychologists assess his personality and behaviors, in which the conclusion was quite unanimous on the matter of his narcissism. His attitude of grandiosity was on full display at every one of his campaign rallies and other random gatherings to pump up his followers wherein he crowed about all the grand things they would do, making America great (again?), making the economy the best it’s ever been, making the military stronger than ever, etc., because no one is better at those things than him. It would be fascinating and so telling if Trump were to actually take the NEO assessment (and to see if he answered the questions honestly).

Another common Big 5 trait seen among narcissists, in relation to the low agreeableness score, is surrounding themselves with people who tend to agree with them unquestioningly; pushovers who are often afraid of them, frequently people with very high agreeableness scores who are trusting and cooperative. This behavior could be observed almost immediately after Trump’s transition into the Oval Office, when he immediately dismissed almost everyone in a prominent or powerful position and installed someone of his own choosing whom he was familiar with and knew he could control. Case in point: “Once in power, narcissistic leaders pursue their own interests, often taking out-sized risks, manipulating others, and behaving in unethical ways. Even worse, when a narcissistic leader achieves success their self-confidence increases, they feel justified in ignoring the advice of others, and they take even more risks. Success chips away at their hold on reality.” (O’Reilly & Chatman, 2020) He constantly made decisions and executive orders against the advice of experienced professionals, with disastrous consequences.

In yet another excellent exemplary display of the traits of narcissism, when Trump lost the 2020 presidential election, he absolutely refused to accept the results. Demanding thousands of ballot recounts, suing the states in which he lost, and taking to social media to proclaim all about the unfair illegality of the “stolen” election, he all but had to be dragged kicking and screaming from the White House. It strains credulity to think how many years of people telling you that you’re a successful winner despite all evidence to the contrary it would take to believe this so hard. This exorbitant display exhibits the narcissistic traits of:

* Grandiosity (to the point of utter delusion)
* Combativeness
* Defensive
* Undeserving entitlement
* Superiority

These two theories (Kelly and Big 5) can, and have repeatedly been used to assess personalities like that of Donald Trump—and, along with other theories, they arrive at the same conclusions, albeit by different paths. That can be an apt way of viewing different personality theories; just different paths, different styles; not necessarily better than one another, just different perspectives of assessing mostly the same things. The conclusion on which these paths converge in this case, however, is that Donald Trump quite undeniably has narcissistic personality disorder and displays a number of extremely prominent narcissistic traits.

References

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