
The Enigma of Trumpmania



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

The real mystery behind Donald Trump’s political success is not the man himself, but the zealous power of his supporting masses and the underlying social and psychological dynamics that drive his supporters.

In Frank Capra’s Academy Award-winning film *Mr. Smith goes to Washington*, James Stewart’s character leads a one-man campaign against dishonest politics. Mr. Smith is a naïve, self-conscious idealist stalwartly fighting corrupt politics in the U.S. Senate. Defying bullying and bribery, he sticks to his values and social convictions and he triumphs in the end. His character is making a humane difference.

Donald Trump, too, has voiced his outrage against a “corrupt system”. But that is where the similarities end. Given his attraction to one-man rule, Trump is an epitome of despotism and self-pandering, not social justice. He is also a larger-than-life lesson in personality theory: an unholy alliance of a narcissistic personality disorder and the psychopath.

Typically, people suffering from a narcissistic personality disorder have a grandiose sense of self-importance. Their worlds centre on power, success

and appearance. They exaggerate their achievements and talents and are cocky, self-centred and manipulative. In addition, they feel a strong sense of entitlement, always expecting special treatment. Many narcissists lack empathy but behind their mask of super-confidence, we often find a person with fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism.

In terms of psychopathy, many may appear normal, even charming, but also display persistent antisocial behaviour. Their lack of conscience, empathy and their inability to feel attached to people contributes to a predatory lifestyle. They manipulate others by playing to their emotions. They feel little or no regret or remorse for people caught in their venomous web.

Trump fits this unholy dyad to a tee. He is famous for his self-aggrandizement, gets off-balance and becomes highly defensive when he perceives slights, and attacks and denigrates everyone who disagrees with him. He has no empathy for others, is careless with facts, and he has a Teflon capacity when confronted with information he finds disagreeable. This kind of “acting out” would raise fewer flags if he were running for office in a banana republic. But he is running for the highest office in the most important country in the world, and his candidacy has implications not only for the U.S., but also for the rest of the planet.

Looking for a saviour

Trump is who he is. The greater conundrum here is why he has the zealous support of so many people? What are the underlying psychological and group dynamics at play? Taking a more in-depth look at his supporters, we can identify processes such as regression, dependency, idealisation, the wish to believe, splitting and identification with the aggressor.

From an evolutionary psychological perspective, our tendency to deify people in leadership positions is deeply embedded in the human psyche. This could be attributed to our evolutionary history; eons of developmental “programming” that took place to ensure survival during the early days of Homo sapiens. When we think of our Palaeolithic ancestors, we should remind ourselves of the many dangers they lived with. Given their vulnerability, it is no wonder saviours were in great demand. This evolutionary thread, may explain why we have a primitive *tendency to regress*, to submit ourselves to the dominance of the leader of the herd.

Regression in times of stress

Taking a developmental point of view, our disposition to regress into states of *dependency* could also be accentuated by our experiences in infancy. When we are small and relatively helpless, we believed in our parents' omnipotence and omniscience. In the process of becoming a person, we continue to idealise and identify with competent, admired others. Eventually, as part of the process of growing up, we come to realise the importance of relying on one's own resources. In crisis situations, however, and in periods of high stress, we tend to regress to the old pattern of dependency and to look for strong people to guide, and at times, deliver us.

Given where we come from, this longing for saviours is part and parcel of our psychological makeup. When social and cultural institutions are disintegrating, the attraction of powerful leaders can become even more tempting. Caught up in an emotional whirlwind of uncertainty, anxiety and fear, we become less selective in both thought and action; in short, we become very gullible. We may slip into child-like ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, even to the point of abdicating personal responsibility. Manipulative leaders, adept at simplification and dramatisation, rise up on the vulnerabilities of such situations to present themselves as merchants of hope.

Furthermore, Trump knows how to use his charisma, charm, and notoriety to enhance the *idealisation* processes. Idealisation is a defence mechanism whereby we over-estimate a person's desirable qualities and underestimate the limitations. Once again, this defence mechanism starts in childhood when children try to cope with feelings of weakness, inadequacy, and isolation by developing the interpersonal strategy of idealisation, compensating for feelings of powerlessness. But when we engage in such hero worship – when we maximise virtues, and minimise flaws – we hold on to the unrealistic belief that there is a person out there with the power to make things better.

Simple solutions

Trump also encourages *wishful thinking* – which is to hold on to hopeful beliefs without a concrete foundation to realise them. When we are caught in this “wish-to-believe” pattern, we are more likely to find evidence that only supports our position and filter out evidence to the contrary. By making illusionary promises, people like Trump become con men, spinning their tales of empty promises.

Another quality of Trump is his talent *to split*. Splitting (also called all-or-nothing thinking) implies a polarisation of beliefs, events, actions, and people, or seeing the world as either black or white. It's the cherishing of absolutes and the failure to bring together both positive and negative qualities of a person, situation or issue into a cohesive, realistic whole. What makes splitting so attractive is that it offers rather uncomplicated, simplistic solutions to highly complex human situations. This divide-and-conquer strategy is one of the more effective tactics that people like Trump have in their arsenal to manipulate and control the people that identify with them.

Idealising a person like Trump is one thing, but this process can go one step further through *identification with the aggressor*. Although Trump's extreme personality and ideas may scare us, some are also attracted and seduced by the protection he seems to offer. Instead of perceiving him as an enemy or threat, they conquer this fear by trying to become like him and adopting rather than resisting or challenging his position.

Collective delusions

The Trumps of this world have been very successful in using and manipulating complex psychological dynamics. They are masters in spreading false or exaggerated beliefs to create collective delusions and dependencies. They know how to use the mass media, rumours, cultural beliefs and stereotypes to their advantage. Gifted in the power of suggestion, they know how to redefine events and circumstances in their own distorted ways. Creating the illusion of their charismatic infallibility, they attract people like moths to a flame. But followers who relinquish autonomous thinking and buy into the collective delusions of such manipulative leaders rarely recognise the destructive path they are on. They want so desperately to believe the proffered images of unlimited power, regal grandeur and awe-inspiring majesty that they fail to see what the leader really stands for and what the broader consequences are. They cheerfully shake hands, cementing a Faustian bargain, but not recognising the high price that eventually must be paid.

Manfred Kets De Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD's **Global Leadership Centre** and the Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, one of INSEAD's Top Executive

Development Programmes. His most recent books are [**“You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges”**](#) and [**“Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure your Organization Lives Happily Ever After.”**](#)

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [**Twitter**](#) and [**Facebook**](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/enigma-trumpmania>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.