

## A Unified Theory of Trump

### Psychology Today

January 10, 2017

Trying to fully elucidate Donald Trump's psychological pathologies is fast becoming a national pastime. If the core of Trump can somehow be held up to the light that reveals all, can the Republic and the increasingly nervous planet somehow be saved? I don't know the answer to that, of course, but out of both civic duty and sheer desperation, I'd like to give this a shot. I'd like to propose, as it were, a unified theory of Trump.

When people discuss Trump's psychology, they most commonly reference his narcissism, which is indeed something to behold – a garish, intrusive spectacle that both fascinates and repels. It's also hard to miss his dishonesty, present to a degree so shocking and bizarre that one wonders how he relates to it within himself. Does he truly believe, at least at some level, that just because he himself says something, it must, by that reason alone, be true, despite often abundant evidence to the contrary? This explanation fits nicely with his narcissism, and does seem to be the best guess.

What I'd like to focus on more specifically, though, is the suggestion, made by the comedians Jon Stewart and Dave Chappelle, among others, that Trump is the embodiment of an internet troll. A study published in 2014 in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* looked at the personality attributes of internet trolls – defined as people who behave 'in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the internet' – and found that being an internet troll is strongly associated with very high levels of sadism. The study clearly showed that internet trolls derive real and measurable enjoyment from provoking, abusing, and hurting other people over the internet.

Now sadism is a strong word, and to accuse someone of it can certainly seem harsh and impolite. And it's true, thankfully, that sadism in its most extreme form is relatively rare. When sadism, however, is construed in the broader sense of deriving some sort of satisfaction, some sort of psychological reward or 'payoff' from another person's pain or emotional distress, it actually is far more common than most of us would like to admit.

The way our brains seem to work is that we pursue specific behaviors because those behaviors release rewarding neurochemicals – primarily endorphins – in specific 'reward' areas of our brains. We're highly motivated to, for example, eat and have sex because the high level of endorphins released by those activities 'reinforce' the behaviors, establishing a strong desire to repeatedly pursue them. The same is true of experiencing intimate social bonds with other people, which will also release very large amounts of endorphin in our brains.

Unfortunately, however, rewarding neurochemicals are also released in the brain in more unsavory ways. Experiments in both people and animals have clearly shown that aggression, for

example, can be extremely rewarding – in mice, the experience of physically beating up a smaller mouse can produce what appears to be a drug-like high in the victorious mouse. The same is undoubtedly true of many people, especially young men, who clearly can derive great enjoyment from physical aggression. Donald Trump, to take one example, has said that when he was younger, he ‘loved’ being involved in physical fights.

In modern life, however, partly because overt physical aggression is often socially unacceptable, it’s far more common for people to display aggression in more social or emotional ways – to claw, bite, and pummel each other, in effect, with hurtful words and insults, which will activate very similar brain circuits as physical aggression, and apparently also release rewarding neurochemicals in the brain. Studies have also shown that reward areas in the brain are strongly activated by revenge, a clearly aggressive act. One study showed that when a man who had acted wrongfully and dishonestly was electrically shocked, other people who had witnessed his wrongful behavior experienced high activation levels in reward areas of their brains as they watched him being shocked. The experience of revenge or retribution can feel ‘sweet’ to us apparently because it produces an endorphin release in reward areas of our brains that is very similar to the release we experience when we eat delicious, sugary deserts.

Aggression and revenge are often pursued, at least in part, to establish a sense of dominance over other people – to feel somehow ‘more than’ those people. Dominance can unquestionably feel intoxicating, and, as we all know, it certainly is better than feeling inferior to, or ‘less than,’ other people. But there are huge costs, especially in our close relationships, to becoming overly attached to that feeling of ‘more than.’ Healthy relationships require mutual respect and a sense of equivalent worth. A relationship where one person is consistently in the role of being ‘less than,’ and the other person is in the role of being ‘more than,’ is never going to be a truly healthy or fulfilling relationship.

As I’ve written about previously, people who are in the healthiest, most loving relationships very much want the person they love to find and sustain states of emotional and physical equilibrium, or homeostasis – indeed I’ve proposed that this desire, or ‘drive,’ is what love, at its core, actually is. When you truly love someone, you want them to be in the ‘flow’ of their lives, to be in homeostasis, to be happy. The most destructive people, however, often operate in the exact opposite way: consciously or unconsciously, they seem to do their best to throw other people *out* of homeostasis. Although it may sound perverse, such people try, in effect, to dysfunctionally ‘bond’ with other people by bullying them, ‘popping’ them with hurtful remarks, or making them afraid, anxious, or insecure. Controlling and manipulating other people in this way seems to provide a potent drug-like reward in their brains that acts as a dysfunctional substitute for the rewards they might otherwise receive from healthy relationships.

As unsettling as it may sound, Donald Trump is probably the clearest example in public life of this latter dynamic. As far as one can tell, Trump appears to have no truly close friends, and his relationships in general show every sign of being relatively shallow. As everyone now knows, he

can be a terrible bully, and is highly prone to hurling insults and put-downs at almost anyone, often in the most personal terms. He is deeply, compulsively attached to feeling ‘more than,’ to establishing dominance over everyone around him.

As is typically the case with people who show compulsive ‘more-than’ behavior, Trump, despite all of his bluster, clearly has some very deep insecurities. By so often boasting, for example, about how ‘smart’ and ‘educated’ he is, Trump unwittingly hoists a red flag that points to his deeper fear or feeling that, in fact, many people are quite a bit smarter and more educated than he is. He has all sorts of psychological defenses that seek to protect him from this reality. Claiming to be able to see through things in ways that other people can’t, is one – hence his penchant for bizarre conspiracy theories. Another, I would say, is partly what explains his often shocking degree of ignorance about the world for someone who is about to be president. Instead of ever really bothering to learn very much, to do his ‘homework,’ his strategy is instead to delude himself into believing that he is so special, so smart and all-knowing, that he doesn’t actually need to spend much time learning anything. But the deeper reason for this pattern, I believe, is that, if he did focus on learning more about the world, and fully realized and accepted the importance of doing so, it might be far more difficult to defend his fragile psyche against the reality of how little he actually does know, especially for a president-elect.

Indeed, Donald Trump will do almost anything, go through almost any psychological, emotional, or linguistic contortion, not to feel inferior, or ‘less than.’ Feeling that he is not clearly dominant, that he is somehow ‘less than,’ appears to represent a true existential threat to Trump – the thought itself seems to be all but inadmissible in his psyche, something he doesn’t really allow himself to experience or feel consciously. The dysfunctional cycle typically starts for Trump when another person criticizes, insults, or disrespects him in a way that threatens to generate a ‘less than’ feeling in him. Then, almost reflexively, and often with tremendous, violent force, his ‘more than’ compensations take over. If people don’t go along with the stories Trump tells about himself, those people will become a severe threat to his ‘more than,’ and will then be subject to his vengeful, often sadistic wrath. This is typically when Trump makes his most outrageous statements, and when he nakedly seeks to throw other people out of homeostasis to reinforce his ‘more than,’ his dominance, his ability to manipulate and control them. He does this in many different ways – by overt insults, or hurtful, disparaging remarks; by threatening people with lawsuits, which is likely to instill at least some fear or anxiety in them; or by threatening other forms of potentially distressing payback, such as humiliation or loss of their jobs. When Trump is in this dynamic, in particular, truth and reality have little relevance – the only important thing is to feel ‘more than’ again, to ‘win,’ to try to expunge the unspeakable ‘less than’ feelings that are completely intolerable to him, that appear to profoundly threaten his sense of safety and worth as a human being.

Another key part of his strategy in this respect is to create uncertainty about what his exact motives and state of mind are. In any given instance, he may be consciously manipulating or ‘playing’ other people, or he may simply be deluding himself – who can really tell? Whether he

actually believes what he says, or whether he's aware of being dishonest but is simply focused on other priorities – such as 'winning' – is really anyone's guess. These uncertainties about his motives and state of mind allow Trump to more effectively control and manipulate people, to keep them uneasy and off-balance, to sadistically and addictively generate non-homeostasis in them – to make them angry, frustrated, afraid, or otherwise distressed. Trump, that is, appears to derive an enormous psychological and emotional 'charge,' a drug-like reward, from generating different forms of emotional distress in other people with the overriding goal of 'winning,' of establishing dominance over them. It's the basic behavior pattern of an internet troll, but Trump behaves this way when he's off the internet as well.

These basic dynamics – which, I would suggest, drive nearly everything that Trump, at least in public, does – are, to say the least, terrifying to see in a president-elect. But this is the reality of our situation now, and it won't do us any good to pretend otherwise.

I am fully confident, however, that, despite all of his profoundly destructive and dysfunctional patterns, Trump, like any other human being, is more than capable, through the process of therapeutic healing and self-discovery, of finding more goodness within himself, of growing as a person to benefit both himself and the many people he influences.

It so happens that I work as a therapist out of an office very close to Trump Tower in Manhattan, where Trump's primary residence is. So Donald Trump, if you're reading this, please, for your own sake and for all of our sakes, call me for a session.

## References

Buckets, E. E., Trapnell, P. D. & Paulhus, D. L. (2014). Trolls just want to have fun. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 67, 97-102

De Quervain, D. J. F. et al. (2004). The neural basis of altruistic punishment. *Science*, 305, 1254-1258

Source: [PsychologyToday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com)