

Mary Trump on the Political Psychopathology of President Donald

Review of Mary L. Trump, Ph.D., Too Much and Never Enough

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Contents

Diagnostic Labels	3
The Family System	4
Donald isn't Really the Problem After All	5
References	6

When I worked for the New York City school system as a school psychologist, I occasionally sat on panels to interview people applying for various positions. Someone commented to me, “You know who does the best in interviews? Psychopaths. They are not nervous. They figure out what interviewers want to hear and give it to them. They are charming and make good impressions—when they want to. This hides their weaknesses from others.”

So it has been with Donald J. Trump, in the opinion of his niece, Mary Trump. She has intimate knowledge of Donald and his family, based on many years of experience, and is a clinical psychologist. While various other psychologists and psychiatrists have speculated (in and out of print) about the president’s mental health, none have direct experience of his personality and behavior. She has not had a clinical relationship with him, such as psychotherapy or testing, so there is still an element of speculation involved, as she acknowledges. She writes clearly, only occasionally using technical terms (such as “learned helplessness” or “mirroring”), which she immediately explains.

Besides being a revolutionary anarchist (libertarian socialist), I am a New York State licensed psychologist with a Doctor of Psychology professional degree (Psy.D.). I find her book fascinating.

Diagnostic Labels

By and large, most attempts “*to make sense of Donald’s often bizarre and self-defeating behavior*” (12) have relied on the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—5th Edition**, produced by the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5 2013). Usually there is a reference to Narcissistic Personality Disorder, “*A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy...in a variety of contexts.*” (DSM-5 2013; 327) Dr. Trump says of the president, “*He meets all nine criteria...*” of this disorder, as listed in the DSM-5. (12)

Mary Trump suggests “co-morbidity:” more than one diagnosis applying. She notes that he may also fit the diagnosis of Antisocial Personality Disorder, “*A pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others....Failure to conform to social norms....Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying...or conning others for personal profit or pleasure....Impulsivity....Irritability and aggressiveness....Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to...honor financial obligations....Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another.*” (DSM-5 2013; 324–5) The most extreme forms of Antisocial Personality Disorder are considered as being a “psychopath” or (the term she uses) “sociopath.”

The author also raises the possibility of Dependent Personality Disorder. She says this includes “*an inability to make decisions or take responsibility, discomfort with being alone, and going to excessive lengths to obtain support from others.*” (13)

Also, “*He may have a long undiagnosed learning disability that for decades has interfered with his ability to process information.*” (13) This includes the possibility of dyslexia, a reading disability. That would explain his reluctance to read—even briefing papers prepared for the president. She does not estimate his level of general intelligence, although referring to the limits of “*his ability to process information.*” (13) Other members of his family have been intelligent, such as his father, his older sister (a federal judge), and his older brother (a pilot), but Donald is another story. (The evening tv show host, Stephen Colbert, quoted the book as describing his father, Fred Trump, as “*a high-functioning sociopath,*” and commented, “*If only he had passed on the ‘high-functioning’ part.*”)

in this book, Mary Trump does not explicitly use psychoanalytic object-relations theory. Drawing on how she describes the president's behavior and thinking, the level of his character structure is apparently more dysfunctional than the usual neurotic personality (of most of us) but somewhat better than a psychotic ("crazy") personality. He probably fits in the "borderline" level of character

A psychodynamic approach might fit Donald's pathologies into a range of "exaggerated attempts to consolidate a sense of self....[In] phallic narcissism...the individual seeks to exhibit himself or herself to win endless accolades and approval to defend against intense feelings of guilt, shame, worthlessness, and humiliation.... All [these syndromes] involve issues of self-reproach, guilt, and pre-occupations with self-definition, self-control, and self-worth. All these introspective disorders tend to emphasize [problems with] cognitive processes, and they share an emphasis on aggression that is directed at others or the self. People with these disorders are much more concerned about self-assertion and aggression than about bonding and relatedness." (Blatt & Levy 1998; 89–90)

Dr. Trump acknowledges that DSM terms are limited in really understanding Donald Trump, his lived experience, his thinking, his psychodynamics, and his social behavior. "The label gets us only so far." (12) "Donald's pathologies are so complex and his behaviors so often inexplicable that coming up with an accurate and comprehensive diagnosis would require a full battery of psychological and neuropsychological tests that he'll never sit for." (13) (I would love to administer the Rorschach Inkblot Method to him.)

The Family System

The author pictures Donald by placing him in the dynamic context of his dysfunctional family system. His mother, Mary, is described as physically weak and ill, often withdrawn, with little interaction with her children. His father, Fred Trump, is bluntly described by the author (his granddaughter) as a "sociopath," that is, utterly lacking in empathy or moral conscience. He was domineering, insisting on getting his way, and cruelly sadistic. A forceful and ambitious man, he made a fortune in real estate in Brooklyn and Queens.

The overwhelming but un-loving father and the distant mother had enormous impacts on their five children, of course. This included the writer's father, "Freddy," the second-born child and eldest son, and Donald, the next son. Freddy was under great pressure by his father to be his heir in the real estate business. But Freddy did not fit in; his father responded by increasing his personal disapproval. Freddy wanted to become an airline pilot, something he was good at, but his father Fred sneered at this and demanded that he knuckle under. Over time, Freddy became an alcoholic, failed at his airplane career, was divorced by his wife, and died at a young age.

Donald had been a screw-up all his youth—the book says his older sister did his homework and he paid a friend to take the SATs. Yet he became the successor to Fred's empire. He was good at glad-handing people and networking, but not really at the business of real estate. He expanded into Manhattan, but was repeatedly a failure. His father successively bailed him out. To Fred Trump, Donald was the extension of his success, as Mary Trump sees it. But when Donald opened New Jersey casinos, where he did not have his father's contacts, he was a disaster. He failed and the banks bailed him out, until they stopped doing it. The only "business" he did really well as, was pretending to be a successful businessman on television, dominating other actors.

To Dr. Trump, Donald is a hollow man, a sociopath who enjoys playing a great person in order to try to win his (now gone) father's approval (which he more-or-less got) and his love (which he could never get). His constant lies, his bullying, his cheating others, his transactional relationships with everyone, including his family and his wives, were all covers for his sense of inadequacy and inferiority. *"He rants about the weaknesses of others even as he demonstrates his own. But he can never escape the fact that he is and always will be a terrified little boy. Donald's monstrosity is the manifestation of the very weakness within him that he's been running from his entire life."* (210–1)

Donald's attitude toward his father has been repeated by his fan-boy reaction to authoritarian leaders abroad: Putin, Jin, Kim, the Saudi prince, Erdogan, and Duterte. Whether or not Putin "has something on" Donald, he is strongly drawn to brutal, ruthless, and cynical authoritarians. He wishes he could be like that and pretends he is.

I am not going to go over the family history which is outlined here nor repeat the telling anecdotes about Donald's often strange behavior. Mary Trump says little about herself, outside of her reactions to her grandfather, her parents, and Donald. Just in passing, so to speak, she mentions her lesbianism and that she could not be open about it even to her beloved grandmother. She does review her experience after her father's death and the dishonest way she and her brother were treated by the family in terms of inheritance.

Donald did not have a program or set of policies, although he has racist and nativist prejudices—against African-Americans, Jews, immigrants, and so on—also women. Otherwise he twists and turns, saying this thing or that, in order to arouse a base and to confuse his opponents. He has no strategy for election—he had one set of skills and if they resonated with enough of the voting population, he was politically successful. But when this approach became less popular—as it has currently—he does not change his behavior because he cannot. He does not know any other way to be.

When the novel coronavirus hit the U.S. and the world, Donald brushed it away. He would not face up to it nor let anyone else in his administration face it. It was interfering with his plan to run for reelection on economic "prosperity." Therefore he denied that it existed and/or said it would vanish any day now, like a "miracle" As it got worse, he could not admit that he had been wrong. He could not understand the science nor trust the advice of the scientists, who were no doubt out to get him. As parts of his right-wing base became ever more hysterical, he did not try to calm them but sought to ride their craziness and whip it up to an even more fevered pitch. So his behavior became ever more bizarre and dysfunctional, and more people died and will die. He does not care about that, but it bothers him that the voting public does not believe his contradictory and delusional claims. In a recent interview he lamented that it was unfair that Dr. Anthony Fauci was more popular than he is. "It must be my personality," he sadly concluded.

Donald isn't Really the Problem After All

While the author puts Donald Trump in the context of his family, she only hints at the way Donald and his family fit in the context of the overall society. It is obvious that Fred Trump's success was only possible in a society which valued money-making above all else, as he did as an individual. And Donald's success (despite all his business failures) was only possible in a society which valued braggadocio and surface glibness over real interpersonal connection, that values

self-centered ambition over community. The name of that system is capitalism and its regulating mechanism is the state.

After all, if Donald Trump is so terrible, how come he was nominated by the Republican Party (out of about 14 other candidates)? How come he was “elected” president (even if he lost the popular vote by a few million)? How come he has not been laughed out of office or at least discredited by the entire political class and the whole of the media (instead of supported by a major political party and a right-wing media system)?

“The government as it is currently constituted, including the executive branch, half of Congress, and the majority of the Supreme Court, is entirely in the service of protecting Donald’s ego; that has become almost its entire purpose.” (201) This is something of an exaggeration, but not entirely so (the Republicans get something in return, such as huge tax cuts for the rich, deregulation of the economy, and reactionary judges at all levels).

Why does a minority of 35 to 40 percent continue to support him despite the wreck of the U.S. health system and economy? What is it about Donald’s personality which resonates among his base?

*“The deafening silence in response to such a blatant display of sociopathic disregard for human life or the consequences for one’s actions...fills me with despair and reminds me that **Donald isn’t really the problem after all.**”* (my emphasis; 204–5)

Donald Trump is personally eccentric in many ways (such as in his attachment to Russia). But in other ways he is logical culmination of decades of political devolution. This is clearest in the history of the Republican Party, which has gone from a center-right party to a far-right cult, rejecting science and embracing ignorance, playing to racist and nativist popular prejudices, and also relying on anti-LGBT and anti-women’s rights for its appeal. Meanwhile the Democrats have been following along behind them, becoming the new center-right party (now with a “progressive” but powerless wing). The economic and political reasons for this are important, as is the political mass psychology of sections of the people as they react to these developments. While it will be good to see the back of the vile Donald Trump, electing Joe Biden will not really solve “the problem.”

I do not criticize Mary Trump for not writing a different book. Nor for failing to be rise to the level of those who provided deep insights into the social-psychological pathologies of capitalist society, such as Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, or Paul Goodman. (I would guess that she is not a radical but a Democratic liberal.) It is enough that she provides us with insight into the dysfunctional psychology of the current president of the United States. It is up to us to generalize further.

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