

Deconstructing the Appeal of Toxic Leaders

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Abstract The results of the 2016 United States presidential election continue to puzzle many observers searching for a mechanism to explain the appeal of such an atypical candidate. Indeed, several authors have observed that Donald Trump displays behaviors that are associated with a narcissistic personality disorder (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/10/28/opinions/trump-campaign-narcissism-lipman/>; McAdams, The mind of Donald Trump, The Atlantic, 2016; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/22/is-donald-trump-a-textbook--narcissist/?utm_term=.80214dd189cd). These analyses focus on who the leader is rather than why followers endorse such a leader. Likewise, leadership researchers have begun to explore the “dark side” of leadership (Lipman-Blumen, The allure of toxic leaders: why we follow destructive bosses and politicians and how we can survive them, Oxford University Press, 2005; Kellerman, Bad leadership, Harvard Business School Press, 2004). Here, I argue that a focus on followers provides a better understanding of the appeal of toxic leaders. The appeal of toxic leaders stems from several factors, including implicit leadership theories, parental models of leadership, collusive relationships, as well as denigration out-groups. Taken together, followers play a crucial role in the legitimization of toxic leaders.

Keywords Toxic leaders • Individual differences • Followers

Leadership research has traditionally focused on leaders. The literature is replete with the studies of who the leader is in an effort to determine the traits and behaviors that are associated with leader emergence and effective leadership. However, this approach has been criticized as “leader centric” (Meindl 1990). Given that leadership reflects a dynamic interaction between leaders and followers (Riggio et al. 2008; Shamir et al. 2006), focusing exclusively on the leader does not fully capture the leadership process. Indeed, Shamir (2007) described followers as “co-producers of leadership”. Here I contend that a better understanding of follower factors is instrumental to understanding the appeal of toxic leaders.

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Implicit Leadership Theories

Implicit leadership theories provide a lens through which individuals view, evaluate, and respond to leaders (Lord and Maher 1991; Shondrick et al. 2010). Briefly, observers categorize targets as “leaders” based on how well they match observers’ implicit leadership theories, or leadership schemas (Lord et al. 1984). Implicit leadership theories provide structure to cognitions regarding leadership and consist of traits such as sensitivity, dedication, charisma, intelligence, and tyranny that individuals tend to associate with the word “leader” (Lord et al. 1984; Offermann et al. 1994). Although individuals may share a common typical leader schema (e.g., Den Hartog et al. 1999; Lord et al. 1984; Offermann et al. 1994), they differ in terms of what leader characteristics and images they consider ideal (Keller 1999). It should be noted that implicit leadership theories have a clearly defined center but fuzzy boundaries. Therefore, even though there may be wide spread agreement about certain characteristics, such as intelligence, associated with the word “leader” (e.g., Lord et al. 1984; Offermann et al. 1994) there is still variation based on individual differences.

According to the self-concept literature, schemas and prototypes tend to differ in a self-serving manner. Namely, when asked to indicate the characteristics most central to a desirable social category, people will endorse the same characteristics that they believe they possess (Dunning et al. 1991). Likewise, Keller (1999) contends that because being a leader is socially desirable, viewing oneself as a leader, or potential leader, serves as a mechanism to boost self-esteem. Therefore, the ideal leader is analogous to self.

Foti et al. (2012) extended the hypothesis that the ideal leader is similar to self and examined the relationship between ideal leader profiles and self-leader profiles. Importantly, thirty-three percent of sample endorsed either an autocratic or anti-prototypical leader profile that was higher on tyranny and lower on sensitivity than was characteristic of the prototypical, socially desirable leader profile (Foti et al. 2012). The results provide a tangible demonstration that not everyone’s implicit theory of leadership is that of an effective leader. Furthermore, Foti et al. (2012) reported that when participants endorsed a more negative view of an ideal leader, they tended to endorse similar characteristics about themselves as leaders.

Parental Leadership Models and Attachment

Variation in implicit leadership theories has also been linked to early childhood experiences. Parents provide children with an initial model of authority and set subsequent expectations for future interactions with leaders (Keller 2003). It should be noted that both social learning and psychoanalytic frameworks suggest that individuals may prefer familiar leadership models regardless of their social

desirability. Indeed, Keller (1999) found that idealized leadership images mirrored perceived parental traits. Namely, individuals who perceived their parents as tyrannical were more inclined to consider leader tyranny ideal. These findings may be explained by attachment theory, which suggests that early experiences with caregivers influences expectations, motives, and actions.

Variation in caregiver responsiveness yields three different attachment styles. First, consistent caregiver responsiveness is associated with a secure attachment style. Secure individuals expect partners to be trustworthy and perceive themselves as worthy of love (Shaver and Hazan 1994). Second, inconsistent caregiver responsiveness is associated with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style. Anxious-ambivalent individuals are preoccupied with attachment, have low self-esteem, and worry about rejection from others (Mikulincer and Nachshon 1991). Finally, consistent caregiver unresponsiveness is associated with an avoidant attachment style. Avoidant individuals are defensively self-reliant, may have hostile relationships with peers, and tend to deny their need for connection (Shaver et al. 1996). Attachment styles have been linked to work orientation. For example, secure individuals do not use work to satisfy their unmet needs for love (as do anxious individuals) nor do they use work to avoid social interactions (as do avoidant individuals) (Hazan and Shaver 1990). Keller (2003) contends that attachment may shape expectations of leaders as described by implicit leadership theories. Namely, anxious individuals may project their unmet attachment needs onto leaders, whereas avoidant individuals may harbor negative expectations about leaders. Indeed, leader tyranny may be normalized in the minds of avoidant followers.

Collusive Relationships: The Dangerous Bargain

According to psychoanalytic theory, collusive relationships are characterized by the unconscious interplay of two partners who rely on the complementary reactions of the other to get what each feels is missing from inside him or herself (Willi 1982). Kets de Vries (1999) observes that collusive relationships between leaders and followers will only work if the personality makeup of the two players is complementary. There are two groups of people likely to enter into a collusive narcissistic arrangement; individuals who act as a positive reflective mirror for narcissists and individuals who have unsolved dependency needs (Kets de Vries 1999). In both cases, these individuals lack self-confidence and may identify with a powerful leader in order to bolster a shaky self-image. This need can be so strong that followers may agree to things that they know are wrong; a price they are all too willing to pay. Furthermore, identification with abrasive and aggressive leaders allows followers to vicariously transform themselves from the helpless victim to the powerful actor (Kets de Vries 1999).

Denigration of Out-Groups

Lipman-Blumen (2005) contends that authoritarianism is a hallmark of toxic leaders who often impress followers by exercising power against groups whom followers dislike, fear, or envy. It has long been known that stereotypes about other groups may satisfy a self-esteem motive (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979). By viewing out-group members as inferior, one is able to increase one's sense of personal value in a relative sense. Moreover, the creation of out-groups confirms the "correctness" of one's beliefs. By denigrating those who are different, individuals reassert the validity of their own world view (Schimel et al. 1999). Therefore, when toxic leaders attack a low-value group, they rarely encounter significant resistance (Lipman-Blumen 2005). However, leaders rarely stop with one group. Instead, leaders will move on to other targets, but by this time, followers have been "tranquilized into a false sense of security" (Lipman-Blumen 2005, p. 100).

The Appeal of Donald Trump

The above analysis suggests several reasons why toxic leaders, such as Donald Trump, may appeal to followers. First, a significant percentage of individuals endorse either autocratic or anti-prototypical leader profiles that are higher on tyranny and lower on sensitivity than prototypical leader profiles (Foti et al. 2012). Therefore, these individuals are more inclined to endorse leader characteristics such as tyrannical, domineering, and manipulative. Foti et al.'s (2012) results also suggest that this group of followers may view such behaviors as within the latitude of acceptance. Therefore, followers who endorse autocratic or anti-prototypical leader profiles would not view tyrannical behavior as aberrant. Instead, tyrannical behavior may have solidified support for Donald Trump from some followers because it was consistent with their mental models of ideal leadership.

Second, some followers may be drawn to toxic leadership models simply because they are familiar. Parental models of tyranny may provide the foundation whereby leader tyranny is not only expected but is also considered ideal (Keller 1999, 2003). Therefore, Trump's leadership style may have unwittingly resonated with some individuals because his leadership style mirrored that of their parents.

Individuals may also be drawn to toxic leaders because of self-esteem motives. Self-esteem needs can be met by (1) endorsing a leader who perceived as similar to self, (2) identifying with a powerful leader, and (3) endorsing a leader who denigrates out-groups. First, some individuals may have been drawn to Trump's leadership style because they perceive themselves to possess similar characteristics. Therefore, endorsing Trump provided a mechanism to validate some followers' sense of self as well as provided followers with an opportunity to view themselves as "leader-like". Conversely, some individuals may have been drawn to Trump's narcissistic behavior because it enabled them to identify with a powerful leader as a

means to bolster their shaky sense of worth. Finally, Trump's derogation of out-groups may have strongly appealed to individuals who failed to benefit from the fruits of globalization. For example, Trump had widespread support among blue-collar workers and individuals living in rural areas. By promising to secure the boarder and build a wall to keep out the terrorists and "bad hombres" (Castañeda 2017), Trump may have bolstered some followers' comparative sense of worth.

In conclusion, a focus on who the leader is fails to fully explain the appeal of toxic leaders. Instead, the appeal of toxic leaders stems from a variety of follower factors and helps explain why followers may grant toxic leaders power. Followers may gravitate toward toxic leaders because their behavior is consistent with followers' leader images, followers may use leaders as a vessel onto which they project their unmet needs, or the messages articulated by toxic leaders may seize upon cultural biases and stereotypes. Taken together, the appeal of toxic leaders is much less about the leader than it is about the followers.

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