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Leadership and Psychopathy

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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What makes a successful leader? Assume the operational definition of successful leadership is maintaining or increasing power. Assume that power is the ability and will to maintain a preferred disparity between reality and some ideal. And note some successful political leaders have been labeled psychopathic, both by professional political psychologists and their lay kith and kin. Are some leaders, then, successful in spite of their psychopathy or because of it? The psychopathy label seems to be attributed based on a leader's involvement in a pattern of so-called antisocial behaviors-- e.g., bribery, lying, a reign of terror, and so on. But the label often connotes more than just engagement in such behaviors for intrinsic reinforcement or instrumental value. Otherwise, one becomes psychopathic because one engages in psychopathic behaviors and engages in psychopathic behaviors because one is psychopathic. So the label also refers to some biopsychosocial nexus of characteristics, some dysfunctional predisposition. It's almost as if the threat to society that the term psychopathic and the associated term antisocial reflect is so nefarious that the behavior must have some intrapsychic core. Even some radical behaviorists, at least those who employ reality testing as well as ideological axes, have admitted failure in pursuing antisocial rehabilitation without addressing the psyche.

The intrapsychic core of the psychopath may involve a specific learning style. This style may comprise attentional processes geared largely towards what is concrete and of immediate personal relevance, as opposed to what is abstract and of a longer-term relevance. These processes seem to be very responsive to reward contingencies and inadequately responsive to punishment contingencies. They also may include linguistic and emotional interpretive anomalies as well as difficulties in shifting awareness, especially in task conditions maximizing left-cerebral hemisphere involvement. Moreover, the attentional processes of the psychopathic learning style also are assumed to underlie behavior that is insincere, impulsive, and characterized by a lack of planning and unstable personal relationships. The hypothesis that these attentional processes exist has found empirical support for tasks in different sensory modalities, especially visual and auditory.

So can a political leader be psychopathic and be successful? Given the above, perhaps not, especially for the sorts of logical and analytical tasks most often researched in the psychopathy literature. But are these tasks germane to being successful? The successful political leader may be characterized not by analytic and logical acumen, but by an affinity for intuition and experiential perceptiveness. If this is so, the very nexus of characteristics-- viz., the psychopathic learning style-- which is termed dysfunctional in certain contexts, may be a significant strength in others. Political psychologists, sociologists, and even political philosophers such as Machiavelli and Liu Hsiang are often adept at what the successful leader is not and inadequate at what the successful leader excels. Is this comparative observation correlated with labeling the successful leader as psychopathic or dysfunctional to begin with? Certainly, there is much which variants of the scientific method can contribute to political knowledge. And much which they cannot. (See Kosson, D. S. (1996.) Psychopathology and dual-task performance under focusing conditions. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 105, 391-400; Berlin, I. (October 3, 1996.) On political judgment. *New York Review of Books*, 26-30.) (Keywords: Leadership, Psychopathy.)