

In Search of Truth I: Hubris and Narcissism

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Research demonstrates that the predictions of many experts about the future are often “devastatingly” wrong. (Kahneman, 2013). Those experts with the most knowledge are often the most unreliable. This is because many experts develop the “illusion” of skill and can become over-confident. They develop the so-called “arrogance of over-confidence”. This kind of illusion of expert knowledge and subsequent “arrogance” is not only risky and can provide false hope in situations of Coronavirus, but also in the process of company strategic planning.

The problem is not that leaders who attempt to predict the future make mistakes – that’s a given (Kahneman, 2011). It’s that errors of prediction are inevitable because the world is complex and unpredictable (who clearly predicated the coronavirus?). What tends to worsen these situations and make them more dangerous is that people with the most knowledge can tend to emerge as leaders, with lots of influence on the people around them. As Kahneman describes, psychologists have confirmed that most people (and especially senior leaders) genuinely believe they are superior to most others on desirable traits (including knowledge and expertise), almost developing a narcissistic perspective to their thinking as those around them admire and enable their leaders’ expertise.

Inaccuracies of Expertise: The Power Law and Hubris

What happens with the sense of superiority and a touch of narcissism? What we are likely to find is that a closed system is established in which information and assumptions are simply bouncing around in an echo chamber. There is no one person of sufficient stature or authority to question the knowledge being shared (supposedly without biases) and predictions being made (based on this knowledge). System theorists would suggest that a closed feedback loop has been created. There are no buffers in this loop—hence it becomes what is called a “positive” (self-reinforcing) feedback loop that accelerates exponentially. The validation of knowledge is operating by something called a *power law*—confidence in the knowledge and resulting predictions is increasing by a power of two or three (that is two times two times two etc.). It may seem

appropriate that this power law is in effect, for there is also a power law operating with the virus itself—the spread of COVID-19 (and all pandemic viruses) accelerates exponentially.

Let's take it back one step: why the closed system and why the narcissism that helps to create the closed system and is reinforced by it (another positive feedback loop). The narcissism and overly optimistic and inflated sense of expertise that results from and is reinforced by the closed system is related, (in some contexts), to something that social psychologists call the *hubris hypothesis* (Aronson, 2018). According to this hypothesis, a person's (especially a leader's) absolute optimism and surety is received more positively than the perspective offered by a leader whose optimism is described in a comparative manner (providing some perspective and balance on a positive outlook). While comparisons can provide more balanced understanding (assuming the comparisons are based on sound research), psychological research shows that audiences tend to dismiss these as being negative and tend to believe the absolute optimistic viewpoint – people tend to want certainty. Herein lies the risk, where knowledgeable leaders with narcissistic tendencies, make absolute statements about the future which are then rarely challenged by those around them.

The Don Quixote Hypothesis

There is a slightly different way to view the narcissism of experts. This second perspective is offered by psychologists with a more clinical orientation. It is referred to poetically as the Don Quixote Hypothesis. We see a graphic and poetic illustration of narcissism in Cervantes' narrative regarding a character called Don Quixote. As an aging man the Don was not satisfied with the everyday. He looked back to the age of chivalry and valor—a romantic era that was ending at the time Cervantes wrote his epic tale. Quixote elevates Aldonza, a sluttish serving girl at the Inn, to a much higher status (as Dulcinea). Windmills become foreboding ogres. A barber's bowl is transformed into a knight's helmet. Don Quixote typifies a narcissistic leader who is dominated by inflated spirit (“in-spiration”).

Sadly, Quixote must eventually retreat from his narcissistic fantasy. Cervantes forced his fictional character, Don Quixote, to see himself for what he truly is. Quixote was required to look into a mirror, having lost in combat to the “Knight of the Mirrors.” This shattered his illusions and his dreams. Mirrors often serve as instruments of vision and prediction, yet the triumphant knight is

using a set of mirrors to destroy Quixote's vision and spirit. The knight is himself an illusion. He is actually a son-in-law of Quixote who has grown increasingly impatient with the Don's antics. The well-intended Knight of the Mirrors demands that the Don acknowledge he is actually an aging man of modest means. Quixote is jolted into "reality." He has become a mad man who is dressed, not for a battle, but rather for a foolish masquerade.

When confronted with the mirrors, Don Quixote's ego and spirit rapidly deflate. He is left an old and dying man, with neither illusion nor a will to live. Don Quixote is thrown into depression, having suffered what psychologists call a "narcissistic wound." He finds no support to match the challenge that he is forced to face in the mirrors. In many ways, Quixote represents the fundamental challenge of contemporary leadership—especially during the anxiety-ridden era of the pandemic. He only recovers his "sanity," or at least his spirit, when his "support group" (consisting of Dulcinea and the Don's sidekick Sancho Panza) comes to his rescue, identifying and honoring his own distinctive "treasure." Certainly, his compelling vision is to be honored, as is his devotion to both Dulcinea and Sancho. How then does he embrace the vision, while also embracing reality?

Narcissism, Expertise and Leadership

The story of Don Quixote inevitably leads to a discussion of and reflection on the role played by narcissism in the creation of experts (and more generally) leaders. At the present time, we are particularly concerned about those who lead with seeming expertise about COVID-19. To some extent, all leaders have a bit of narcissism in them. They revel to some extent in the attention they have received from other people and are pleased that other people respect, trust, or at least follow the direction which they as leaders provide. The extent of narcissism will, of course, vary widely from leader to leader. At one extreme we have those leaders who can think about (or talk about) nothing other than themselves.

There is a second type of narcissism which is somewhat less obvious and parallels Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman's (1994) description of the narcissistic family. This second type is the closet or "quiet" narcissism to which many of us might candidly admit. At some level, we envy the accolades received by other people. We are uncomfortable being on the sidelines at events where other people are the focus of attention. We smolder a bit, though soon dismiss our resentment

and join the celebration. This too is a form of narcissism and it can serve as a barrier to effective leadership. At these moments, we quiet narcissists can learn much about ourselves and our own leadership challenges. Like Don Quixote, we must face our own reality.

An expert is often a quiet narcissist. They don't believe that they are "full of themselves" but are instead carefully and compassionately offering the "truth" about a virus or other health challenge. They quietly are resentful, like many of us, about being ignored and they hone their skills at being persuasive in a calming manner. And we assist them in this endeavor (setting aside our own quiet narcissism). The issue grows even more complex at this point. Why do we set aside our own needs on behalf of the needs of the narcissistic expert? Why do we remain silent while someone else is taking charge or espousing a specific expert-based policy?

Narcissism is usually framed as a defect of the individual personality—an overwhelming and ultimately-debilitating obsession with one's self—a deadly fixation on one's reflection in the pond (to borrow from the Greek myth). Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman have taken a step forward in suggesting that narcissism is something more than an individual characteristic. It is grown and nourished in a narcissistic family system that places the needs and interests of the parents ahead of the needs and interests of the children. Rather than the parents being primarily responsible for the happiness (even welfare) of their children, the children are responsible for the parents' happiness and welfare. In this family system, the children are there for the parents' sake rather than the other way around. While the family system was originally created (supposedly) for protection of the children (since like few other animals the human child is born virtually helpless), the tables are turned in the narcissistic family. Parents are expecting (even demanding) that their children protect them—protecting the parents' self-esteem, credibility, authority, and so forth.

Narcissism and COVID-19

We propose that the narcissism associated with expertise regarding the corona virus resides in a similar distortion of responsibilities—a distortion that is heightened by the wide-spread anxiety and lack of confidence to be found among most of us operating in this pandemic era. As the consumers of the expert's knowledge about COVID-19 we have a job similar to that of the child in a narcissistic family. We are to reaffirm this expertise (another closed system and positive

feedback loop). The wellspring of this expert-based narcissism in the world of COVID-19 is based in uncertainty regarding our own competence. We may have such a low level of confidence about the virus that we don't believe our own perspectives and concerns deserve any attention from other people. In the musical, *Chicago*, the husband of the major protagonist sings about being "Mr. Cellophane." Other people look right through him. They don't even realize that he is in the room—and he certainly can't call attention to himself, given that he isn't worth much. This route is sadly traveled by many people today. Do any of us deserve to be sitting at the table when ideas about the virus are being offered? If we are sitting at the table, aren't we vulnerable of being declared a fool. Someone, like Don Quixote, who is masquerading as someone we truly aren't (in this case, an "expert")?

As non-experts and non (or low level) narcissists we can relate (painfully) to the story of Echo (a story which is often poignantly forgotten alongside the story of Narcissus). While wandering through the world (having been cursed by Hera), Echo encounters and falls in love with Narcissus. Left speechless and rejected by Narcissus, Echo flees and leaves her voice behind—forever. Are we similarly enthralled by the narcissistic credentials and eloquence of the virus experts? Do we set aside our own voice on behalf of the seemingly brilliant insights and wisdom of those who claim deep knowledge of the virus and its future? Once again, the question is posed: should we be sitting at the table and offering our own options (our voice). We believe that the answer to this question should be Yes! Each of us should be at the table (in our organization or community) when issues regarding the virus are discussed.

Relationships and Voice

When it comes to COVID-19, we should all be at the table and voice our concerns and perspectives. Yet, we stay away. Because the children in a narcissistic family are to attend to the needs of the parents (rather than the other way around), they grow up being reactive to the needs of other people and devote much of their time and attention to reflecting on what other people want (not just their parents). While this attention to the needs of other people is often appreciated in our society, the costs for the child reared in a narcissistic family are great. Ultimately, this obsessive other-directedness, according to David Riesman (2001), is a widely-found source of distress and alienation in contemporary societies—see his classic 1950s book called *The Lonely Crowd* as well as Whyte's (Whyte and Nocera, 2002) study of *The Organization*

Man. The same kind of uncritical conformity is to be found in our present-day reliance on the COVID-19 expert. We are desperately looking for relationships and are regressing to a more primitive state when confronting the profound, existential threat of the virus. Experts will protect us—and we must align with them to find this protection.

At an even more basic level, the child reared in a narcissistic family finds it difficult to establish intimate relationships. Many years ago, Erich Fromm (2019) (in *The Art of Love*) proposed that we can't truly love another person until we can love ourselves. This proposal seems relevant to Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman's analysis of the intimacy problems facing the products of a narcissistic family and to our own reticence to offer our voice about the virus. As children, members of the narcissistic family can't identify their own needs and wants, hence as they grow older, they can never easily let other people into their lives other than through superficial relationships. While their attention in later life to each of their lover's needs may initially seem to be a pleasurable gift, there is a terrible cost associated with this one-way relationship. Similarly, like Echo, are we infatuated with (do we "love") the expert (Narcissus)? Do we set aside our own needs on behalf of the expert? Do we remain without voice as we listen to the persuasive predictions of the experts on pandemics?

Conclusions

Neurobiologists have recently indicated that human beings (more than any other animal) are oriented to bonding (as mediated through the neurochemical oxytocin)—probably in large part because of the vulnerability of the new-born human child. This bonding will only be sustained if there is a sharing of responsibility and attention. What about the expert leader: do they provide the bonding that we want during periods of intense stress? Does their expertise provide us with a warm, comforting blanket? Are we willing to set aside our own critical faculties in exchange for this blanket? Like Echo, are we willing to be infatuated with the expert and silence our own voice? At a fundamental level, are we willing to collude with the COVID-19 expert and their own hubris and narcissism?

References

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