Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Populism

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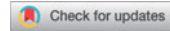
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PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON POPULISM

Abstract. In this article, I discuss some psychoanalytic aspects of populism, an anti-pluralistic political perspective, and the attraction of vulnerable groups to a populist leader. I stress Freud's work on group psychology and utilize contemporary writings to illustrate the plight of vulnerable groups and some of the reasons for their attraction to powerful, aggressive, leaders. The autobiographical report, *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016), is central to my discussion. Profound economic disruptions can result in a group's loss of self-esteem and sense of empowerment. Thus, these vulnerable groups attempt to deal with such traumatic experiences by utilizing maladaptive defense mechanisms, such as denial and projection, in order to protect themselves from unbearable negative emotions. A populist leader takes advantage of the group's vulnerability to achieve his or her political ends. Vulnerable communities require not just realistic economic revitalization, but social and emotional interventions. The understandings outlined here may provide guidance, particularly by promoting the development of supportive mentoring relationships and facilitating improved parenting, and educational approaches that focus on emotional development.

Keywords: populism, group psychology, vulnerable populations, emotions, trauma, defense mechanisms

> There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.
> The sign was painted, said 'Private Property.'
> But on the backside, it didn't say nothing.
> This land was made for you and me.
> Woody Guthrie

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Introduction

The word *populist* first appeared in the 1890s with the founding of the Populist Party, which stood for the interests of the farmers against the big-money interests. In later years, *populism* came to be associated with the blue-collar class in the cities as well. Populism can be hard to predict. It sometimes has a religious tendency; it usually isn't very interested in international affairs; it has sometimes been unfriendly to immigrants and blacks; and it's often anti-intellectual. So populism often switches between liberal and conservative. But the *populist* style always shows its concern with Americans with average incomes as opposed to the rich and powerful ("Populist," 2017).

In essence, populism is derived from the wants and needs of people who feel displaced and ignored by those in power, considered to be the "ruling elite" (Clarke, 2013). The Populist Party's William Jennings Bryant was nominated as the Democratic candidate for president in 1896. Prior to that time, there were two periods in the United States when populist feelings surged: the rise of Andrew Jackson in the early part of the 19th century, following the dominance of the Founding Fathers, and, the Know-Nothing or American Party, a group that opposed immigrants and Catholics in the mid-19th century. In our contemporary age, populism is contributing to a variety of social upheavals throughout the world, including Brexit in the UK and Trumpism in the United States; Bernie Sanders may also be considered to be a populist, although he is not anti-pluralistic.

Too often, social and political theorists have overvalued the power of the intellect to address complex social conflicts and upheavals, such as current political conflicts. In fact, this was the approach of the Founding Fathers of the United States, who were a product of the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, this approach can underestimate the power that emotions play in the governing of people's responses in political situations, particularly when large groups of people feel a threat to their security.

In this article, I take up some psychoanalytic concepts addressing these emotional issues. By focusing on emotions, we can deepen our understanding of the interpersonal phenomena, particularly the psychological mechanisms, which may lead vulnerable groups to believe in the power of aggressive authoritarian leaders. Such leaders use populist language asserting that they can easily solve complex social problems, even if empirical evidence suggests the contrary. Here, I do not pretend to know

how to address or modify the extant political and economic structure of the country. Rather, I focus on understanding the psychological mechanisms in groups who experience profoundly difficult economic hardships. Unbearable emotions may result from the loss of these groups' self-esteem and loss of their sense of empowerment. Populist leaders appeal to such vulnerable groups by reinforcing the mechanisms of projection and denial—they blame other groups for their plight and deny the complex sources of the difficulties that need to be addressed. Part of the appeal of populist leaders includes the promise of a return to a golden age that, in reality, usually never existed. Psychologically, members of vulnerable groups may be drawn into the illusion of restoration of an idealized past that keeps them from fully recognizing how to address problems in the present.

In addition, this article does not address the ongoing plight of African American and other minority communities who have been the victims of racism and other forms of oppression. I focus predominantly on white working-class communities, especially in the Rust Belt, groups hurt by the economic downturn during the last several decades. As a matter of fact, the plight of the working class, as a result of a factory closing in Reading, Pennsylvania (one of the Rust Belt states), is dramatized in a poignant way in Lynn Nottage's play, *Sweat* (as cited in Brantley, 2017). The play depicts how economic stressors and resultant financial hardships can promote a dramatic loss of self-esteem and loss of sense of empowerment, and how racist and anti-immigrant responses emerge in formerly close friends.

Furthermore, I do not address the personal qualities or political qualifications of the president nor the relationship to the president of all of the groups who support him, but only the relationship of the white working-class population of the Rust Belt to Donald Trump during the campaign and after the election. This group constitutes the prime example of a group vulnerable to the entreaties of a populist leader that is the subject of this article.

Obviously, many factors were operative in determining the outcome of the very close presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (Kakutani, 2017). The political influence of the Rust Belt vote constitutes one important factor. Rust Belt states, in particular

Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan, delivered the electoral college victory to Donald Trump, albeit by a small number of votes.[1]

The Election and The Economy

One significant puzzle of this election involves how to explain a shift in Michigan from a plus-10 for Obama to a loss for Clinton in 2016. For example, Macomb County and Oakland County had very different voting patterns. Macomb County is mostly white, has a median household income of around $53,000, and may be characterized as "working class" and "socially conservative." This county voted for Obama twice, yet Trump won by a significant margin. In contrast, neighboring Oakland County is considerably more affluent (median income of $66,000), has a university, and more of a new economy, i.e., an advanced manufacturing economic base. It is more diverse, yet traditionally conservative. It voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and, in 2016, for Clinton (McQuarrie, 2016).

In an analysis of the Macomb County voters, a variety of factors emerged: The "decline of unions and the loss of industry have put workers on edge" (Schulzke, 2016). Trump promised enormous changes that would lead to prosperity. In fact, concerns about the economy and anti-professional attitudes seem to be central in the voting patterns of white working-class voters (Williams, 2016).

An examination of two current books and one TV show may help us understand the powerful attraction of white working-class groups, particularly in the Rust Belt, to a populist leader. Among the books are *What is Populism?* by Jan-Werner Müller (2016), a professor of politics at Princeton University, and *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by J. D. Vance (2016). Müller's book is persuasive, because (as noted by Ash [2017]), his social analysis of populism addresses much of what we can observe in contemporary movements. Vance provides us with an autobiographical account of growing up in the Rust Belt city of Middletown, Ohio, and the Appalachian town of Jackson, Kentucky. After high school he went to the Marine Corps, to Ohio State University, and then to Yale Law School.

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[1] The potential role of social media and other foreign interference is also not part of this discussion.

As another resource in our study of populism, consider the reality TV show, *Duck Dynasty* (A&E), involving a family who made millions by making duck calls for hunters. *Duck Dynasty* broke many records throughout its run, ultimately ranking as the highest-rated nonfiction series in cable television history. The show depicts the wealthy Robertson family who live in a small town in Louisiana. Despite their wealth, the family lives in what they themselves call a redneck culture, including sharp distinctions between what are viewed as masculine and feminine activities. In the show, men hunt, fish, wear camouflage, and sport long, unkempt beards. The women are basically homemakers. The people on the show use faith-based language. They claim the superiority of their lifestyle to what they perceive as the more "feminine" lifestyle of intellectual elites who do not value hunting and fishing. Such a dramatic disparagement of femininity leading to dramatic distinctions between genders would make it implausible for them to vote for a woman to be president. At one point, there was a short-lived public controversy concerning homophobic comments by one of the family members (O'Sullivan, 2016).

Most notably, this show had the largest correlation of any TV show between its viewership and those who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. "Liking" this show on Facebook was a greater predictor of voting for the president than having voted for George W. Bush in 2000. Clearly the cultural divide in the United States—the coasts and big cities versus the heartland—is reflected by a profound disparity in TV preferences (Katz, 2016). The struggling members of the working class in Rust Belt states are part of the audience of *Duck Dynasty*.

Inequality

Throughout human history, inequality within populations has been more the rule than the exception. In fact, in order to diminish inequality, there is evidence that only dramatic social catastrophes such as disruptive wars, revolutions, dissolution of states, and epidemics will be effective (Scheidel, 2017, cited in Reeves, 2017). Scheidel wonders whether the data might support the effectiveness of proposed solutions, such as education, to decrease inequality (pp. 432–435).

The devastation of what is called the Great Compression from the onset of World War I until the end of World War II offers one example of a disruptive period of war that led to a period of lessened inequality (Scheidel, 2017, pp. 375–376), which has then reversed itself in the

last few decades. Although the stark contrast between the broad pros-
perity and diminished inequality in America during the postwar boom
period and the recent increasing inequality (the infamous 1%) may lead
us to view that our current social disequilibrium is an unusual societal
circumstance, it may actually be the norm.

As one example of deeply rooted convictions of the extensiveness
of inequality, the original Woody Guthrie lyrics in the epigraph to this
article, illustrate the economic divide between landowners and the rest
of "us" during the first part of the 20th century. The verse I have cited
was not originally released as part of the song, "This Land is Your Land,"
a song that then went on to great popularity without that deeply critical
and negative line. "Nora Guthrie [Guthrie's daughter] mentioned that she
had an idea about why the 'private property' words, although originally
recorded were never released as part of that album. In her own words,
she said, "This is the early '5'0s, and [U.S. Sen. Joseph] McCarthy's out
there, and it was considered dangerous in many ways to record this kind
of material" (Spitzer, 2012).

E Pluribus Unum? (Out of Many One?)

Are we once again an economically deeply divided country, or have
we—in fact—always been divided, and are not really become one out
of many divisions, as our country's motto signifies? At times divisions
are swept aside and at other times divisions are dramatically exposed.
It seems to me that populist leaders have an ability to exploit such di-
visions in order to garner supporters among those who are disaffected
and who see themselves, in Woody Guthrie's terms, as excluded from
the best land by a big wall. Donald Trump's supporters continue to re-
spond positively to his promise to build a big wall that will keep others
out. This support for a wall can be construed in terms of the defense
mechanism of "turning passive to active." It may supply a counterforce
to the feeling of having been excluded: "let's do to them what others
have done to us."[2]

How can we understand the response of a deprived and vulnerable
group to a political leader who promises to restore economic health and,
most important, this group's self-esteem and sense of empowerment?

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[2] It is ironic that there seems to be data to show that Woody Guthrie wrote of his contempt
for his landlord, Donald Trump's father (see Kaplan, 2016).

How can we understand this appeal to the leader, regardless of the problematic nature of the promises?[3]

In times of economic insecurity, people may experience frustration and anger towards the political establishment. These frustrations may be vague and unfocused, but they can be tapped by charismatic leaders who evince strength, power, and aggression and communicate emphatically that only *they* can solve the problems that afflict vulnerable groups. These leaders assert that powerful intellectual elites have conspired with immigrants and other "outsiders. As I illustrate in my discussion of Vance's autobiography, a leader who says, "Make America Great Again," offers a powerful inducement to groups whose identity includes a profoundly patriotic core. Thus, the populist leader offers a seductive package that promises not only relief from social and economic woes, but restoration of a glorious past with which members of vulnerable groups identify. They become convinced that the strong leader will restore their pride and security.

What is Anti-Pluralistic Populism? (Drawn from Jan-Werner Müller, 2016)

Donald Trump illustrates many of the characteristics found in populist leaders. Populist leaders proclaim that they alone are the ones who represent the people. They maintain that all other potential leaders are not legitimate. They alone have the solutions to the problems of the country. Most important, populist leaders, in essence, assert over and over that the people they represent are the only "real people." Populist leaders aim to unify that group, while excluding those who do not support them, and therefore invalidating other potential leaders. It is important to note that Müller stresses that not everyone who criticizes the elites is a populist. The key element is that populists are anti-pluralistic (p. 101).

Thus, in his analysis, Müller emphasizes that the "we" of the populist leader refers to a circumscribed group, not to an entire nation. Even when populist leaders call for referenda, they know what the outcome should be. As a result of their claims to moral rectitude, they may resort to

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[3] "To be sure, some of Trump's white working class supporters might become disillusioned once they realize the consequences of his policies. But it's just as likely that they'll be pleased, as will Trump's larger coalition, by the restrictionist and isolationist aspects of his agenda, like his targeting of Muslim immigrants and his plan to build a wall along the Mexican border" (Heer, 2017).

conspiracy theories to prove that the elites have kept the silent majority from speaking.

When populists gain power and are no longer a protest movement, they maintain that only they are the authentic voice of the people. They delegitimize all other groups or organizations, such as the press. Protests are also delegitimized; and a post-truth age can ensue. The corrosion of truth is the most dangerous sequela given that many populists deny the substance of empirical facts.

> In his inaugural address, Trump said, that
> He would govern with all Americans in mind, but he directed his words mostly at the tens of millions of people who heard his call during the campaign and responded. His election, he said, means that "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer. Everyone is listening to you now" (Blake, 2017).

In other words, from his first day in office, Trump has continued to address his core supporters, as if only they count as the real people; no one else matters. There was and continues to be no attempt to broaden his audience. Furthermore, Trump asserts that the only legitimate media are those who support his views. All other news media are considered to be "fake news."

Müller believes that in order to oppose populist leaders, other groups must assert the value and importance of pluralism. The unanswerable question, of course, is whether anti-pluralistic populism would be eventually voted out or whether greater authoritarianism might result. Müller states that "populists should be criticized for what they are—a real danger to democracy," because, among other things, they are anti-pluralists (pp. 102–103). Müller, in fact, stresses that the perverse use of democratic language—"let the people rule"—can lead to an anti-democratic end result (p. 6).

Pluralism and Compromise

Pluralism is clearly a fundamental characteristic of modern America society that is currently under attack. Pluralism can only be maintained via the balancing and compromise among a variety of constituencies and their governmental representatives. This principle was propounded in *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 2003). In "Federalist No. 10," for example, James Madison notes that

the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man … [and] the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property … [but] no man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. (Hamilton, Madison, Jay, 2003, p. 47)

Madison asserts the importance of a balance of powers to a democracy. In a populist government, however, the leader is actor, judge, and jury: only he or she determines what is the "real" truth and what it is not. Madison highlights the principles that came to be laid out in the Constitution: these principles promote a variety of checks and balances, to ward off the threat of unchecked desires by any person or group of people.

In fact, it is also worth noting that Einstein and Freud addressed the danger of unrestrained exercise of power in society, in light of conflicts between one's own desires and the desires of one's fellow human beings. Einstein asked: "Is it possible to control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?" (Freud, 1933, p. 201). Freud noted that

Of the psychological characteristics of civilization [to prevent war] two appear to be the most important: a strengthening of the intellect, which is beginning to govern instinctual life, and an internalization of the aggressive impulses, with all its consequent advantages and perils. (pp. 214–215)

Freud and subsequent psychoanalysts have underscored the value of the psychological mechanism of compromise formation in individuals among the variety of psychical processes, such as id, ego, and superego. This is worth comparing to Madison's emphasis on the value of seeking to balance the competing desires of different groups in society. For Madison, this effort included the development of an independent judiciary to adjudicate competing aims among branches of government. There is a striking similarity between an individual's check and balances in his or her internal life and the balance of power in our constitutional democracy. Authoritarian populist leaders approach decision making in ways that directly oppose the system of checks and balances laid out in the U.S. Constitution.

Attraction to an Authoritarian Leader

Although Müller's analysis of populism is invaluable to any effort to understand the phenomenon, it does not address the question as to why certain groups, at different times in history, have been attracted to authoritarian populist leaders. Müller stresses that populist voters should not be considered as "pathological cases of men and women driven by frustration, anger, and resentment" (p. 103). He decries what he calls a "liberal attitude that effectively prescribes therapy for citizens whose 'fears and anger has to be taken seriously'" (p. 5). Müller's approach, I believe, fails to recognize the role of emotions in people's political proclivities, particularly when they are frightened and angry. In fact, Müller may be putting too much weight on the role of intellect in political decision making, especially during turmoil-filled periods in people's lives. As products of the Enlightenment, the Founding Fathers memorialized intellectual processes in the Constitution. Freud's response to Einstein also stressed the power of the intellect to control human aggression.

It seems to me that we can only understand the attraction of groups of people to populist leaders by being aware of the group's decreased self-esteem and decreased sense of empowerment, both intensified by economic distress. Because of their emotional needs, vulnerable groups may become susceptible to the promises of authoritarian populist leaders, notwithstanding these leaders' unsubstantiated promises of improvement.

The implications of the leader-group interaction, which I discuss here, are similar to those derived from terror management theory (TMT), developed by Ernest Becker in his 1973 *The Denial of Death*, which was influenced by Freudian as well as other ideas. TMT postulates that humans are motivated to avoid signals connected to mortal threat, even if there is no obvious connection to death. It posits that the unique awareness of death and tragedy renders human beings prone to debilitating terror, and that this terror is managed by a dual-component anxiety buffer consisting of a cultural worldview and self-esteem. When humans are faced with a very threatening situation they will utilize a closeness with a group that feels compatible and able to bolster one's individual self-esteem. Recently, evidence has revealed that in times of social turmoil, "people are prone to embrace charismatic politicians to mitigate existential terror" (Cohen, Solomon, & Kaplan, 2017).

Populist leaders respond to the felt existential terror of people who feel in desperate straits by reinforcing vulnerable people's maladaptive defenses. Thus, populist leader exploits the vulnerability in order to gain power, with the potential to create an authoritarian regime. A challenge for a democratic pluralistic culture involves understanding how to help those who, in fact, are in a vulnerable state, and therefore, susceptible to the entreaties of an anti-pluralistic populist leader. Of course, economic deprivations need to be addressed. However, only when socioemotional responses to economic catastrophes are also addressed (Irwin, 2017), can vulnerable populations appreciate the value of a system with checks and balances rather than blindly following the false promises of a populist leader.

The Rust Belt and Hillbilly/Redneck Culture

Does this article reflect my prejudicial views, as an outsider, of a culture with which I am not familiar? Am I utilizing an intellectual or scientific attitude as a defense against my unconscious devaluation of a group whose ideals, especially anti-intellectualism, are so different from mine and those of the groups to which I belong? I hope not, but I recognize the validity of the questions.[4]

J. D. Vance (2016) provides us with a glimpse into this culture. Vance has made a transition to, and currently has more than one leg in, the elite culture while retaining ties to his community of origin. In fact, Vance recently moved back to Ohio to start a nonprofit to address the opioid epidemic in his home region (see Berman, 2017).

His personal tale certainly reflects a childhood with abundant examples of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as divorce of parents, verbal abuse, physical abuse, financial hardships in the family, alcoholism and other forms of substance abuse in the family, mental illness in the family such as depression, and witnessing interpersonal violence in the family (Brinker, & Cheruvu, 2017). Vance, in fact, details the adverse childhood experiences that he and his sister suffered

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[4] In this vein, it is valuable to consider Hofstadter (1963, cited in Lemann, 2014), who writes that intellectualism "accepts conflict as a central and enduring reality and understands human society as a form of equipoise based upon the continuing process of compromise." But, in addition, in a democracy there is a constant tension between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism.

(pp. 226–229). Yet, he was able to garner one of the most important antidotes for ACEs: crucial social and emotional supports, mainly from his grandparents and later on from his wife-to-be, as he went on to graduate from Yale Law School. Vance notes the importance of family to those individuals who were able to make successful adaptations in adverse circumstances, *"Each benefitted from the same type of experience in one way or other. They had a family member they could count on. And they saw—from a family friend, an uncle, or a work mentor—what was available and what was possible"* (p. 241, emphasis added).

Vance's self-portrait, along with portraits of his extended family and community, gives us the opportunity to examine in-depth the psychology of a group of people who may be vulnerable to the rhetoric of a populist leader. During the summer of 2016, Rod Dreher, an *American Conservative* columnist, wrote that *Hillbilly Elegy* "does for poor white people what Ta-Nehisi Coates's book did for poor black people: give them voice and presence in the public square" (Rothman, 2016). In fact, *Hillbilly Elegy* serves as an antidote to those who disparage the white working class as the white underclass (Macgillis & Propublica, 2016) and consider this group to be a prime example of racism. On the other hand, Frank Rich (2017) wonders whether the liberal concern with Hillbilly culture is but another "counterproductive detour into liberal guilt, self-flagellation, and political correctness…" (p. 20).

The great strength of *Hillbilly Elegy* lies in its combination of introspection and analysis. Vance graciously gives us an opportunity to view the culture from inside. In his narrative account, Vance shares with us his conflicted feelings as he sought to adjust to life at Yale Law School:

> But as I realized that in this new world I was the cultural alien, I began to think seriously about questions that had nagged at me since I was a teenager: Why has no one else from my high school made it to the Ivy League? Why are people like me so poorly represented in America's elite institutions? Why is domestic strife so common in families like mine? Why did I think that places like Yale and Harvard were so unreachable? Why did successful people feel so *different?* (p. 207)

Vance's comments provide evidence of the felt experience of the polarity of identity and culture.[5] Two examples from the book

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[5] Several colleagues, with comparable cultural backgrounds, who read previous drafts described similar experiences to Vance's.

illustrate this experience of conflict dramatically. When Vance's biological father learns that Vance has decided to attend law school at Yale, the father asks Vance whether he had "pretended to be black or liberal" in order to gain acceptance (p. 194). Later on, between the first and second year of law school, Vance describes stopping at a gas station not far from his aunt's house and striking up a conversation with a woman wearing a Yale T-shirt. She reveals that her nephew goes to Yale and asks Vance about himself. He describes his thoughts in that moment:

> I wasn't sure what to say.... I had to choose: Was I a Yale student, or was I a Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents? If the former, I could exchange pleasantries and talk about New Haven's beauty; if the latter, she occupied the other side of an invisible divide and could not be trusted. ... I would not join forces with her. My answer was a pathetic attempt at cultural defiance: "No, I don't go to Yale. But my girlfriend does." (p. 205)

This is a poignant description of Vance's conflict as he makes the transition between two cultures: "red neck" and intellectual. The defiance he experienced internally may reflect the "us versus them" attitude of his father who assumed that "people like us" do not go to Yale; only "they" go there.

Vance contrasts his own optimism to the pessimism of his neighbors and members of his extended family. He describes the declining blue-collar economy, the overall cynicism in the culture, the absence of heroes (and the consequent loss of pride in the military), suspicions about Barack Obama, ambivalence about Bill Clinton in light of his moral failings. Nevertheless, he goes on to observe: "To understand the significance of this cultural detachment, you must appreciate that much of my family's, my neighborhood's, and my community's identity derives from our love of country" (p. 189).

Vance is drawing our attention to a powerful factor. Caught between love of country and the experience of deep economic uncertainty, as well loss of feelings of self-worth and lack of self-empowerment, what are the members of a vulnerable community to do? To whom do they turn to for help?

Attraction to a Strong and Aggressive Leader

Although many in this country worry about financial security, and may be subject to bigotry and economic displacement, white working-class groups in the Rust Belt and Appalachian sections of the country may be particularly vulnerable to populist appeals.[6] In addition to a range of social, emotional, and health disparities, they do not feel politically protected. For example, they have lost connection to a Democratic Party that had been their political home: "[The Democratic Party's] progressivism is moving them away from working-class voters, and the weakness of the labor movement is only accelerating that" (Shribman, 2016).

For the white working-class communities, the loss of economic security intensified a variety of social and emotional problems: lack of adequate parental support, poor nutrition, poor health, including alcoholism, drug addiction, ACEs, and inadequate educational opportunities—all depicted in Vance's autobiography. As the group's grievances deepen, the problems become magnified, and the community becomes vulnerable to manipulation by aggressive political figures. The populist leader can promote the scapegoating of other groups by projecting onto them the cause for the community's plight, for example, onto liberals who support other minority groups and immigrants. In fact, this scapegoating can inflame prejudicial passions.

In group situations, such as at political rallies, populist leaders promote the group's fears of the other groups. The leader encourages aggression towards the other groups, reinforcing prejudicial feelings instead of providing reassurance and endorsing greater cooperation among various groups who suffer. An increasingly destructive cycle of anxiety and aggression towards others may ensue.

In such situations, vulnerable groups can be characterized as "fight–flight groups" (Bion, 1961): they become aggressive if they are convinced that fighting is their only recourse for survival. From this perspective, a

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[6] A recent report from the Brookings Institution revealed that "minorities, who have traditionally faced discrimination, are much happier and less frustrated than are poor and uneducated whites who live primarily in suburban and rural areas in the heartland. Rising mortality among uneducated whites is the starkest marker of this desperation and is driven by preventable deaths such as suicides and opioid poisoning. No surprise, then, that the 2016 U.S. presidential election exposed deep societal divisions across America" (Graham & Pinto, 2017).

populist leader reinforces a "fight" response rather than having a calm-ing effect. Freud (1921) wrote about the regressive potential in groups in which there are strong ties among the members of the group. Most notably, in this regressed state, the group members relinquish their own capacity for judgment and instead follow the judgment of the leader. Citing, LeBon, Freud notes that the leader must

> be held in fascination by a strong faith (in an idea) in order to awaken the group's faith; he must possess a strong and imposing will, which the group, which has no will of its own, can accept from him. (p. 81)

As a result of relinquishing their capacity of judgment to that of the leader (or in technical jargon the leader's superego becomes the group's superego), "the feelings of a group are always very simple and very ex-aggerated. So that a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty" (p. 78). As a result of this dynamic, the group adopts a simplistic approach to reality. Thus, a vulnerable group becomes susceptible to the leader's assertions that there are simple solutions to their complex problems. A villain is identified as the cause of the group's problems and, the leader promotes increased aggression towards that scoundrel. Chants like "Lock her up" are an inevitable result.

It is remarkable that the great theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr (1932) also recognized the destructive potential of groups. Most recently, Kegler, Stone, and Holland (2017) noted that

> in the political sphere, charismatic leaders are often authoritarian, some-times autocratic, figures who excite "our inner attraction to force." They are the carriers of our projected violence and cruelty (along with our sup-pressed omnipotence). They are our heroic avengers, our agents of swift and sweeping change—at least transiently and in fantasy.

In this context, it is valuable to note Vance's perspective on the in-ner aggression of the white working groups that support the president: "Trump was the first guy who was sort of raising the proverbial mid-dle finger to a lot of people that they wish they could have raised their middle finger to but they didn't have the platform to do it" (CNN, 2017).

Economic devastation has unquestionably led to the loss of self-esteem and loss of self-empowerment in members of such communities (Irwin, 2017). These emotional states lead to an intensification of anger and

aggression. How can social scientists and political leaders help these vulnerable populations transform and therefore utilize this reactive aggression productively? How might members of these communities be helped to help themselves in order to develop more effective modes of adaptation, in place of regression and attraction to the destructive aggression of leaders who may not be responsive to their actual needs? Vance notes the profound limitations of a vulnerable group's aggressive retaliation to the political system. He stresses that long-term problems must be addressed by the government "in both rural and urban communities. But that assistance must be combined with personal and civic responsibility, as well as new thinking" (CNN, 2017).

Addressing Vulnerable Communities: A Psychoanalytically Informed Suggestion

What might psychoanalysis have to offer to social scientists and community leaders regarding these concerns? In order to be helpful, psychoanalytic ideas have to be *experience-near*, that is, they have to make sense to the social scientists who then can translate these ideas to community leaders.

We live in a pluralistic society, to which populist leaders are opposed. Populist leaders stoke the flames engendered by social disparities, promising that their attempts to disrupt the prevailing social order will improve the lives of their followers. Vance argues that working-class support for the president comes from their wish to find:

> Someone who will fix what they believe is a rigged system. But the President risks a backlash if he proves ineffectual at solving the pernicious problems that have plagued their communities for decades. … I do think there could be a cumulative effect where he could start to lose some of the core working-class support that he developed over the campaign, especially if, not so much the particular policies people don't like, but if this sense of things getting worse doesn't reverse, if there isn't actual material improvement in people's circumstances (CNN, 2017).[7]

As a case in point, Vance notes that the community in which he grew up has been plagued by unemployment, familial discord, a variety of

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[7] It is interesting that many Trump supporters are concerned that despite running a populist campaign, his actions in his first 100 days in office are much more traditional (Baker, 2017).

emotional and physical ills, and, most important, the extent of ACEs suffered by many children. Yet, these working-class communities are unified by their love of country and their pride in their contributions to its success, particularly in the postwar economic boom. Thus, in their current plight, they are particularly susceptible to a leader who promises to make *their* America Great Again.

The degree of this community's profound difficulty is illustrated by a 2017 report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC):

> Geographic disparities in suicide rates [greater in non-urban than in urban areas] might reflect suicide risk factors known to be prevalent in less urban areas, such as limited access to mental health care, social isolation, and the opioid overdose epidemic, because opioid misuse is associated with increased risk for suicide. (Kegler, Stone, & Holland, 2017, p. 272)

For example, deaths due to opioid overdoses lead to more Americans deaths than HIV/AIDS caused at its peak. Moreover, in 2015, more people died from overdoses than from gun homicides and car crashes combined (Lopez & Frostenson, 2017).

It seems to me that insights from psychoanalysis can help community agencies develop more effective primary and secondary programs (Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 2003) by targeting child development, helping parents and preschool and elementary school education programs to address children's emotional growth. These programs, for example, can address the importance of containment of a child's strong emotions (for example, see Abrams, 2003, Music, 2011) and the importance of developing a child's capacity to verbalize his or her feelings (as noted by Anny Katan [1961] in a classic work, still relevant today). Children who have difficulties putting their feelings into words inevitably have difficulty dealing with painful emotions. In consequence, they may develop a variety of symptoms and behaviors, including problematic emotional regulation, and may have difficulty in developing their innate cognitive capacities.

Along with containing strong emotions and promoting the development of verbalization, the parent helps the child recognize his or her own state of mind, the state of mind of the parents, and the ability to recognize that different people have differing states of mind, beliefs, and feelings. That is: help the child develop mentalization (Anna Freud Centre, 2015; Auchicloss & Samberg, 2012, p. 151).

Parents who have been traumatized may have difficulties containing their children's emotions, promoting their capacity to verbalize and their capacity to mentalize, because the parents, themselves, have difficulties in mentalization. Therefore, the development of any successful program has to provide support for and address the problematic emotional states of traumatized parents, who are also often suffering from unbearable painful emotional states.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms help all of us deal with our own impulses, as well as cope with real situations effectively. All of us utilize a variety of defense mechanisms to promote adaptation in everyday life (A. Freud, 1936). George Vaillant (1977) noted that the construct of defenses is one of Sigmund Freud's most original contributions. Defenses have been systematized according to levels of maturity (Vaillant, Bond, & Vaillant, 1986). This hierarchy of maturity of defenses, in fact, was incorporated into the DSM IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Moreover, Cohen, Solomon, and Kaplin (2017) identified three broad categories of defense mechanisms: denial, projection, and identification. Cramer notes that denial is greater in children with conduct disorders (p. 137). Hoffman, Rice, and Prout (2016) discuss in detail the nature of defense mechanisms that are utilized by children with disruptive behaviors. Their underlying thesis is that such children continue to use the defenses of denial and projection; these children utilize these defenses to avoid unpleasant and painful emotions that are too painful to experience consciously. Unable to allow themselves to feel the painful emotions consciously, they continue to function in a maladaptive way.

As a result of difficulties in mentalization, verbalization, and containment of their emotions, children can develop maladaptive defense mechanisms that prevent them from mastering the inevitable painful emotions that are invariably intensified by their stressful lives. These maladaptive mechanisms may persist into adulthood, leading to a variety of emotional and eventually physical ills, including opioid abuse.

The states of intolerable and unmanageable emotions in all of us may assume potentially traumatic proportions. They may lead to the perpetuation of maladaptive defense mechanisms, such as denial and projection. To acknowledge pain and suffering may be intolerable. It may be easier to deny a problem and to act as if nothing is wrong. Such forms of denial do not address real problems, such as physical pain, which may lead to

opioid abuse and other problematic consequences. Projection makes it easier to blame someone else and to avoid the pain of looking at oneself and at the community's structure. Without adequate social supports to counteract the deficits in parenting, regressions in functioning may persist or worsen leading to further depression, addiction, alcoholism, violence, and opioid abuse.

We can conjecture that maladaptive defense mechanisms, such as denial and projection, are utilized not only by individuals but by entire groups when they feel vulnerable and threatened by intolerable emotional states. Thus, the combination of a vulnerable group and a leader who foments discord among groups, rather than promoting conciliation and cooperation, can have the effect of reinforcing the maladaptive defense mechanisms of denial and projection. The projection of problems onto others has been a common defense mechanism throughout history, whether in a multicultural society like ours, or in a closed society such as Salem, Massachusetts, in 1693, where the problems in the society were projected onto young women accused of witchcraft. Arthur Miller (1996) wrote *The Crucible* as a creative transformation of that historical event that enabled him to disguise the irrationality and dangers of 1950s McCarthyism in his own time. In other words, vulnerable groups are ready prey for manipulation at any time and in any place.

Mastering unbearable emotional pain is an ongoing challenge. In our work with children we observe the value of addressing children's maladaptive defenses when confronted with painful emotions (Hoffman, Rice, & Prout, 2016). In addition, research indicates that helping parents promote their children's mentalizing capacities promotes healthier forms of adaptations (Slade, 2006). Learning from such work with parents and children needs to be utilized to help vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

Populist leaders play on and reinforce a group's vulnerability, particularly their maladaptive defenses such as denial and projection. A populist leader uses this ability to exploit this vulnerability in order to gain power, with the potential to create an authoritarian regime. Freud's and Bion's work with groups offers us an opportunity to understand the emotional appeal of populist leaders, especially to vulnerable groups. The challenge to a democratic pluralistic culture is to address the emotional needs of vulnerable communities who have differing values and different needs and who may view themselves in competition with one another.

Our challenge is to determine how to realistically help those who may not have the social, emotional, and familial supports that J. D. Vance (2016) did and to avail themselves of some of the resources available to others. In addition to the development of economic programs, programs that address the socioemotional needs of the community are required, especially the fostering of personal mentoring relationships, particularly among new mothers, infants, toddlers, and young school children. Psychoanalytic ideas can add to the work of these programs by helping other professionals recognize the importance of addressing the power of maladaptive defense mechanisms that interfere with the development of realistic solutions to inevitable conflicts. Only when their emotional vulnerabilities are addressed can people appreciate the value to themselves and their families of a system with checks and balances, instead of believing the false promises of a populist leader.

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