Outrageousness is Trump's trump card: Column

Jessica Tracy 8:08 a.m. EDT September 20, 2016

We don’t like people who intimidate and belittle others, but we still give them power.

How has a major political party come to nominate for our country’s highest office a man who regularly expresses extreme arrogance, denigrates large portions of the American population, and publicly encourages violence and even treason?

In fact, Donald Trump's most outrageous acts are exactly the reason he has gotten where he is. Trump has attained power not despite his egotism, aggression, and practices of intimidation, but because of those behaviors.

Although we often assume that people attain social rank by demonstrating wisdom, generosity, or the kind of competence and skills that earn respect, prestige is not the only path to power. High rank can also be achieved through dominance: a tendency to be forceful, assertive, and aggressive, typically accompanied by high levels of arrogance. People who assert their own superiority while intimidating and belittling others are disliked, but we still give them power.

My colleagues and I recently demonstrated this tendency in a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. We brought students to our lab at the University of British Columbia and told them they’d be given a problem to solve completely on their own. Next, they’d get a second chance to solve this same problem but with the help of four other study participants they’d never met, while we filmed their discussions.

So who emerged as leader of these group discussions? We measured high rank through group members' ratings of one another, ratings made by outside observers, and the amount of influence each person actually exerted. No matter which indicator we used, we found the same thing: people who wielded dominance were just as likely to get ahead as those who earned prestige. Group members granted power to the bullies. They told us they didn’t like these dominant people and even feared them, but dominants nonetheless attained influence — largely because of fear.

Human evolution has created two separate tracks to high rank: one based on cultural learning, where the smarter, wiser or more skilled competitor wins, and one based on ancient principles of conflict, where the bigger, stronger or richer competitor wins.

There can be no doubt about which path Trump has taken. He has, of course, worked for many of his accomplishments. But as anyone who’s witnessed one of his political rallies, press conferences, or demeaning tweets knows, Trump wields his power in a way that is aggressive and intimidating. He humiliates those who criticize him, leading many opponents to retreat. They are literally scared away.

Trump’s hubris is the motivating force behind this strategy—as is his pridefulness. Combined, these two qualities form the bedrock of a noxious but empowering emotion that psychologists call “hubristic pride”. Comprised of egotism and arrogance, hubristic pride makes people believe they’re better than everyone else around. In another set of research studies, we found that this variety of pride also makes people hostile, willing to derogate others, and even to assert their own race’s superiority over another’s. Hubristic pride may be what allows Trump to full-heartedly question the moral integrity of Muslim Americans as a group.