

Histrionic Personalities in the Everyday Life and in Power: What should we know about them and how to Interact with them?

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Abstract

In this paper, most prominent psychological characteristics of histrionic personalities, specifics of their behaviour and thinking in case of social normality are outlined. The paper specifically focuses on histrionic personality with leadership qualities striving for power. Psychological defence mechanisms, excessive use of repression, typical motivations, self-esteem and aspirations of histrionic personalities are described as well as characteristics of their conscience, memory and behaviour in situations of intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts. The author suggests the most reasonable ways of interaction with this type of accentuated personalities in psychotherapy and in everyday life.

Keywords: *Conflicts; Conscience; Egocentricity; Histrionic Personalities; Leadership Qualities; Memory; Repression; Striving For Recognition*

Introduction

In 1992, before the election of the 42th President of the USA, I wrote the paper "Our Partner Bill Clinton" published by the newspaper "Rossijskie Vesti" (the main edition of Administration of the Russian President) and then – in the book "Modern Russian Mentality" [1]. Although my analysis and prognosis were fully confirmed, including the fact that this previously unknown politician served two consecutive presidential terms, I haven't found it necessary to write psychological portraits since then. However, this topic seems to be up-to-date again now. There are no any references to specific persons in this article. But the number of histrionic (demonstrative) personalities in the modern world is constantly growing, including in politics and public administration. Therefore, the generalized psychological portrait of such persons has a real practical interest.

In contemporary science, there are hundreds of classifications of personality types, that summarize individuals' characteristics, psychological qualities and behaviour. This branch of science, which is called differential psychology, or psychology of individual differences, is relatively recent. The term was introduced by a German psychologist William Stern in 1900.

However, the interest to this problem has a long history. For instance, in the first known typology, which was introduced by Plato in IV century BC and is interesting not only from historical perspective, five types of social behaviour are discerned: 1. normal, which is characterized by striving for truth; 2. timocratic, ambitious and bellicose; 3. oligarchic, stingy, miserly and thrifty; 4. democratic, morally instable and striving for sensual pleasures; 5. tyrannical, in which the lowest bestial drives prevail.

Scientific phase of research in psychological types is commonly connected to the work *Accentuated Personalities* by an outstanding German psychiatrist and psychologist Karl Leonhard (1976), after which this approach became an independent scientific doctrine [2]. However, we should not forget about Russian priorities and will remind you that Leonhard's concept has a lot in common with idea of "latent" (hidden or compensated) psychopathy suggested by PB Ganushkin in 1933 [3].

What do we need to know about them?

Egocentricity

Typical characteristics of histrionic personality, both genetically and socially determined, include overconfidence, vanity, boastfulness, deceptiveness and egocentricity. Let me remind the reader that egocentricity is defined as one's inability to adequately perceive any point of view that is different from his or her own.

Let us also mention that the term «egocentricity» was introduced by a Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget to describe a kind of thinking typical for children younger than 8 - 10 years [4]. However, he also mentions that this kind of thinking can to some degree persist in some adults, so that their psychological attitudes are still infantile.

Repression

The essence of histrionic personality lies in abnormal ability to repress anything that contradicts his\her self-perception and attitudes from the consciousness. The concept of repression was introduced by Sigmund Freud [5], and this idea can be in the simplest way illustrated by the quote from F Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*): «“I have done that” - says my memory. “I could not have done that” - says my pride and remains unshakeable. Finally — memory yields». However, the word «pride» is insufficient to describe the histrionic personalities' exaggerated self-worth. It should be rather described as hubris and arrogance, sometimes explicitly manifested, and sometimes hidden not only from others but also from oneself, so that one would vigorously deny being so proud of oneself.

Be in the spotlight

Such people have a prominent need to be in a centre of others' attention, or rather admiration. They cannot tolerate being alone and avoid threats to their egocentricity, but they would never feel disappointed in their ideas, even if the latter prove to be flawed or stupid. In this case, these ideas and reactions to them are repressed, and new ones are immediately produced, which are also flashy and are expressed in the same egocentric way. The only thing that makes them feel desperate is serious critical analysis of their ideas, as well as sarcastic attitude to them, when their incompetence is exposed in public. If their close environment or wider circle reacts in this manner for rather long time, histrionic personalities are prone to unpredictable reactions, including revenge or suicide, although more typical is para-suicide or escape into an illness. A somatic disorder, including stroke, heart attack etc., plays a role of a defence mechanism typical for histrionic personality: «It wasn't me who gave in to the obstacles, it's my health that let me down!».

Sincere lie

It is also typical for these personalities that they are unable to admit their mistakes and can always find justifications for their behaviour. They can «forget» what they do not want to know; they can lie without being aware of the fact that they are lying. Histrionic personalities' forgetfulness and deceitfulness are different from other people's. When a non-histrionic man pretends that he has forgotten something or when he resorts to a lie, he feels awkward. A conscious lie is accompanied by a bad conscience and fear of being exposed. Many people feel embarrassed while doing so, some even blush. In case of histrionic personalities, however, repressed memories of their mistakes or misdeeds actually disappear from their consciousness, and they lie in the sincerest way, with innocence in their face and without a slightest trace of embarrassment. Thus, they lie and justify themselves so convincingly, sincerely and nicely, that even those who know the truth would believe them.

Most adventurists belong to this personality type. Their ventures are successful because they are able to evoke trust in others due to their seemingly honest attitude, as they are not aware of their own lie and do not feel it as such. They implement their lie as if it is reality, and they are amazingly artistic in it. When they are acting their role, they impersonate it and do not need to adjust their behaviour to changing circumstances, as they truly endure personal transformation in frames of role, which might persist for a long period of time.

Let me give you a few examples. A histrionic personality, a man who had never been to the army, pretends to be an intelligence service general so that even cunning members of parliament believe him and give hundred thousand dollars to buy themselves a position of a minister, which he promised; the second man had nothing to do with medicine, did not have any medical education, but managed to pretend to be a professor and a head of department in the Ministry of Health: he required that the chief medical doctor of a hospital provided a separate ward to a man who appeared to be the histrionic man's neighbour in common apartment. And this trick worked!

Specifics of success

These personalities are often rather primitive, but some of them can be quite intellectual. They can study well at school and university, get prestigious professions and be active at work. Histrionic personalities, like all other people, strive for others' respect, for financial success and social recognition. However, instead of working hard to achieve these goals, they frequently prefer such deceptive ways as intriguing, sneaking, anonymously reporting others' misdeeds and plagiarizing their ideas. Although their goals are typical for other people as well, histrionic personalities are excessively zealous in their attempts to reach them; they dismiss any moral attitudes and restrictions in order to climb the carrier ladder and feel grandiose.

Sometimes this development includes paranoid ideation and thus becomes pathological, but being a histrionic personality is not a pathology as such.

Histrionic personalities are preoccupied not with what they are doing but with the impression they make. They use very sophisticated tricks, but can be easily exposed as liars if they fail to impersonate their roles, because they cannot behave in a reasonable and sensible way.

Typical patterns of interpersonal relationships

Histrionic personalities are most successful in sales. They work as intuitive psychologists and can understand the customer and find individual approach to him even without special trainings. It is just another talent of histrionic personalities: in order to achieve their goal, they can «disown» their true self and play a role that is most desirable for the other. Such a salesperson behaves in a modest and reserved way with a confident and power-seeking customer and becomes more active and energetic with someone who is shy and indecisive.

Their relationships with co-workers develop in a different way. When histrionic personalities come to a new workplace, they quickly get new friends due to their talkativeness and openness. However, with time some people leave them, because they speak only about themselves and never listen to others and have no interest to others' inner world and feelings. However, the attitude of co-workers to them is generally positive because of their façade of hard-working specialists.

They rarely have conflicts with their superiors, but if this happens, they push it to the end and resort to gossip, blackmail, fraud etc. At first, when they are promoted, they tend to be rather friendly and condescending with subordinates. However, when they reach top-managerial position, their attitude change: they become excessively arrogant, boast endlessly about their achievements, manifest their grandiosity and neglect to others in order to nourish their ever-hungry selves. Their monologues addressing subordinates become eloquent, with expressive mimic, gestures and silences, and employees have to listen to their digressions and life memories, which are getting more and more unrealistic and, as they climb the career ladder, resemble fantasies much more than true stories. They are possessed by unconscious wish to be grandiose historical figures, even if the area of their fame is restricted to a company's department.

Natural artistry

With very few exceptions, histrionic personalities are inefficient managers. Strategic thinking, planning and giving employees possibilities for self-realization are always less important for them than their wish to impress others and to enjoy their grandiosity. That is why the other sphere in which they can achieve a lot is acting and other creative professions; here, their individualism, ability to follow their passions, impersonate their roles, live up to their dreams and unrestricted ideas is in demand. In general, histrionic personalities are most successful when they can incarnate their fantasies.

In some severe cases, their longing for achievements and adventures might push histrionic personalities towards escape into an imaginary world, where nothing can restrict their possibilities and wishes. That is why there are so many histrionic personalities among so-called magicians, wizards, fortune-tellers, messiahs etc. Firstly, they have exaggerated believe in miracles, and secondly, they are deeply involved in their delusions and preach them as true believers, who do not deceive others but are sincerely convinced that they had «revelations». Therefore, they often manage to successfully find followers and propagate their beliefs. It is worth mentioning that they are not afraid of any consequences of their claims and promises, e.g., when they declare that they know the exact date of «the end of the world», because they unconsciously deny the very idea of consequences and responsibility for their behaviour. That is why, even when they are sued for damage they caused to others, such «messiahs» sincerely fail to understand what they are blamed in. They did not lie at all! It is true; in their soul, in their fantasies and psychological attitudes, they are still children, who have no responsibility and no duties, who do not want to admit reality with its limitations and rules. They are unpredictable and changeable. In a romantic relationship, they love not their partner but love itself; they can be easily infatuated with a new partner and lose any interest to the previous one; typically, they do not marry once and forever. They expect that the partner will adore and admire them and stay eternally loyal to them, while for them the partner is just an item in ever-changing list of their possessions.

Populist politicians

In addition to already mentioned activities, histrionic personalities also prefer TV-journalism and politics. When they become political figures, they look great as chairpersons and speakers. If they are deprived of a leading role, they will prefer to join another party or movement. Their speech is full of banalities and well-known quotes and is accompanied by tragic or dramatic tone, mimic and gestures which might become grotesque. They resort to these means to compensate lack knowledge, which is rather superficial in their case, as they get it from popular books, films and brochures. They always have a serious book of a famous author on their bedside table, which they can quote without reading more than 5 - 10 pages of it, and then change to another book. They do not strive for self-development, as they feel that they are already perfect.

Histrionic personalities rarely have natural beauty, and they need to change their physical appearance to look attractive, recognizable, appealing and decisive. Due to the fact that they believe in their infallibility, they rarely use imagemakers or consultants, or if they have to, they would just listen condescendingly to unnecessary advice but stick to their own way.

They are uninhibited, catchy, energetic and self-confident and thus attract attention of electorate, especially of primitive individuals that haven't made their mind yet, so in any election they will have decent rating, and can even win the election in some circumstances.

Neither in business nor in politics they would ever have respect, pity or compassion to their opponent; they would never wish to understand or even to consider his arguments. They are also unable to form coalitions if their leading role is not admitted. Their fight is uncompromising, as they claim to be the only ones who know the truth.

They can feel their audience and tell it exactly what it wants to hear; when they come to a different audience, they would easily formulate completely different ideas, depending on situation. Such lability of political attitudes becomes rather dangerous in informational epoch, so they try to invent phrases that allow for various interpretations and try to remember them and rehearse while looking at the mirror. The higher these personalities climb the carrier ladder, the more bizarre is their inner world and their distorted perception of external reality, and the line between fantasy and reality gets thinner and finally disappears. Their unthoughtful decisions and irresponsible actions leads companies, concerns and even countries to a stalemate, like it happened in case of Hitler and Mussolini, and now with Petr Poroshenko.

Positive qualities

I would like to stress that these characteristics are not exclusively negative. Some other personality types would only benefit from characteristics that histrionic personalities have in abundance. They are ambitious, competitive, creative, striving for achievement, they love novelty, can infect others with their emotions, can unite and inspire others, that is why they can be very successful in professions requiring «human-to-human» interactions. In addition, we are grateful to them for masterpieces of theatre and cinema, literature and arts and other forms of scenic performance. There are two spheres, though, in which they are useless and even harmful: «human-to-machine» interaction, in which their inborn and acquired characteristics do not correspond the demands of profession; and management. They might look very suitable for managerial roles, but they prove to be ineffective managers because of their inability to listen, hear and understand others, and because of their unpredictability.

Histrionic personalities and power

Histrionic personalities are not dangerous. Moreover, in everyday life they are mostly nice, friendly and spontaneous in a childish way, although obsessed with attracting attention: they behave in such a manner that their actions create situational resonance for local or wider audience and bring them into the centre of attention. It is not surprising indeed that such their behaviour is attractive for the wider and most primitive groups of the electorate, so if histrionic personalities have at least minimal charisma, they show good results in elections although almost never (with very few exceptions) win them. However, the abovementioned qualities make them very dangerous in case they acquire power. Due to the specific of their behaviour, when they try to make strategic plans or deal with crises, there is an important factor which influence their decisions in addition to logical reasoning and considerations of adequate approaches to the situation. That is their wish to present themselves as important and outstanding, to show off, to demonstrate their original thinking and to attract others' attention. This factor is overwhelmingly important for them; it overweighs logics, analysis and prognosis and is prioritized over adequate solutions suggested by qualified experts. Historical experience shows that the emergence of such leaders at the state level is always a misfortune for the people and the country. May God save us from such leaders!



Figure : Benito Mussolini (Italy), Adolf Hitler (Germany), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Muammar Gaddafi (Libya).

How to interact with them?

There is not so much advice on interaction with histrionic personalities, because there are individual differences determined by genetics and social factors such as their background, early development and history of their life and activity.

This advice is very simple but not always effective and should be applied only to interpersonal relationship that you want to maintain.

1. You should react in a neutral way to their attempts to manifest their superiority and grandiosity.
2. Never discuss their typical characteristics, not even in indirect way and, first of all, never speak ironically on this topic.
3. Never fully trust these people, considering their unreliability and tendency to exaggerations.
4. Never try to expose their unconscious manipulations but also try not to become their target.
5. Never try to caught them on their lies or incomplete truth, as they are absolutely convinced that they never lie.
6. Perceive them as people who feel comfortable only in their own fantasy world and do not try to change them of destroy this fantasy world: if you are not an experienced psychotherapist, your attempts will fail.
7. Counteract their aggression with your own aggression, as they will not understand any other approach or even will not notice you in any other case.

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