

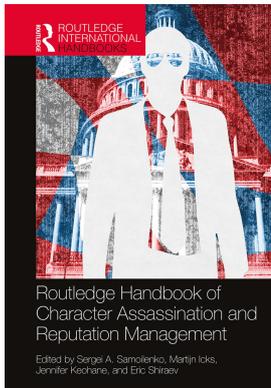
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3

THE TRAUMATIC PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF CHARACTER ATTACKS ON TARGETS

Eric Shiraev and Olga Makhovskaya

Most studies of character assassination tend to focus on the overt behavioural, social, and political features of the attack, as well as on its social and political fallout. Since the take-off of cross-disciplinary studies in this domain around 2010, historians, political scientists, and communications experts have dominated the field. The psychological effects of character assassination, meanwhile, have long been underexplored (Shiraev, 2014). Indeed, one of the least studied aspects of character attacks is their negative psychological impact on the individual who becomes the target, or even the victim. The key question is this: what happens to individuals' inner world, their subjective well-being, after they have experienced a character attack? What is the general and specific psychological impact of character attacks on the individual?

The Psychological Impact

First, we need to define and explain the key terms relevant to our discussion. By “psychological impact” we mean a range of negative and interconnected cognitive, emotional, and behavioural developments that take place within the individual who is the target of a character attack. We assume that the psychological developments that result from an attack include a range of negative emotional reactions (which are usually short-term and passing, such as an angry reaction) or emotional states (which are usually long-term and persistent, such as a depressed mood). The former can influence an individual's mood and his or her immediate decisions. The latter affects the individual's reputation, meaningful relationships, and quality of life.

Character attacks can also exacerbate certain pre-existing emotional states (for instance, an individual's already elevated anxiety or depressive tendencies). They may prompt negative behavioural reactions, such as increased impulsivity or, by contrast, withdrawal. Biographers of Mohamed Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980), former shah of Iran, document numerous and relentless character attacks against him during his tenure as head of state. He was accused of philandering, greed, nepotism, and having a gambling addiction. Such attacks (whether based on factual evidence or not) reportedly had a serious psychological impact on the shah and even influenced his political decisions: He became increasingly impulsive and could be frequently indecisive. Yet impulsivity and indecisiveness had already been traits of the shah's personality since his youth; the attacks, most likely, only aggravated these tendencies (Milani, 2011).

An attack's traumatic psychological impact cannot necessarily be neatly categorised as either short-term or long-term. The psychological changes caused by a character attack – be it a single instance of online slander or a relentless chain of denigration – can be placed on a continuum. In clinical psychology, such a continuum refers to changes that are typically labelled as ascending from (1) mild to (2) moderate to (3) severe. Such emotional states and persistent behavioural trends may develop into serious psychological symptoms that can be medically diagnosed. This means that they often can be recognised as psychological disorders. Psychologists studying character attacks should therefore describe and illustrate these impacts in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders accepted in the United States and many other countries, as well as with international classifications on the subject of psychological trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; American Medical Association, 2018). For example, a character attack can be a contributing factor to a person's adjustment disorder, a cluster of persistent symptoms associated with significant distress that occurs in someone who is unable to cope with a major life stressor. This stressor can be connected to rumours, innuendo, slander, or other forms of direct and indirect attacks. This disorder's symptoms include persistent depressed mood, anxiety, irritability, sleep problems, and feelings of helplessness, to name just a few. Individual personality features and circumstances may exacerbate these symptoms. Once the individual is able to handle the stressor, the harmful symptoms are likely to diminish or disappear altogether. The challenge for an individual is finding the right way to approach the stressor (Powell, 2015).

Any research about the psychological impact of character attacks, especially their traumatic effect, is likely to draw on the general psychological research looking at the influence of traumatic and stressful events on the individual. These studies commonly refer to stress and the factors contributing to stress, acute traumatic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and the individual's coping mechanisms for dealing with stressful or traumatic events. At this stage, we have to refer mostly to research in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and behavioural studies, and apply the results of this research to the study into character assassination (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The psychological impacts of character attacks on an individual can be divided into two main categories: (1) direct and (2) indirect. The *direct impact* of character attacks relates to a range of psychological and behavioural outcomes taking place "within" the target or victim (the individual who is under attack). Such outcomes are supposed to be a direct result of the attack, but they are mediated by situational factors. For example, a university professor may be emotionally traumatised and experience a state of elevated anxiety immediately after reading several personal, insulting remarks against her on Facebook about her recently published research paper. Or in a different example, a student may refuse to go to school on Monday after she has been relentlessly attacked on Twitter by a group of bullies from her high school over the weekend.

The intense impact of personal humiliation is particularly clear in cases of public punishment, which is a feature of many cultures. "Stoning," "caning," and "crucifying," among similar castigations throughout history, allowed public outbursts of anger against the victims, who were usually accused of some crime or moral offense. The psychological impact of this humiliation and profound rejection is likely to be very distressing and traumatic; a person's public rejection becomes a powerful source for his or her traumatic emotions. In a timeless novel by Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina suffered precisely this type of open public rejection by the Russian upper class society of the nineteenth century over the rumours that she was having an extramarital affair. Today's politicians face public humiliation when they are under symbolic yet media-consequential attacks by paint, eggs or tomatoes. It is perhaps even more difficult to cope with these attacks when the number of attackers is unknown, their identity is hidden (as in the case

of online attacks), and the target is unsure how many people would be willing to defend him or her against the attacks (Icks and Shiraev, 2014).

Indirect impact refers to cases where the individual psychologically identifies with a particular target – or several targets – of character assassination or has a special psychological attachment to the cause for which they stand. For example, a devout Christian may be emotionally hurt (such as feeling very angry, helpless, irritated, or agitated) after reading a remark insulting Jesus Christ. This may be an immediate, passing emotional reaction, but it may equally cause long-term discomfort and suffering (a psychological state of distress) within the individual. This is just one example; insulting remarks about other religious symbols and figures should easily come to mind. The infamous Charlie Hebdo massacre took place after two brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, stormed the offices of the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015. Hatred and rage directed against the publication's editors was a psychological and behavioural reaction to the jokes about Islamic leaders and the Prophet Muhammad printed by the publication (Bilefsky, 2015). Plenty of other examples can be drawn from social life, entertainment or politics: Driven by anger or other emotions, some people tend to feel compelled to turn to violence or another destructive action against the source of such negative remarks. The anonymity of these attacks makes the targets even more vulnerable, as they do not know who is behind the attack or how to respond (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Psychological science offers several models or concepts for studying the traumatic psychological impact of life events. We can apply these concepts to better understand character attacks. These models vary in terms of their commitment to empirical research and practical applications. They also approach psychological trauma from different – yet often overlapping – scientific positions (Shiraev, 2014).

The Psychoanalytic Approach

Modern *psychoanalysis* (the approach rooted in the theory of Sigmund Freud and his followers) centres on the individual's unconscious individual features, which are generally rooted in his or her early childhood experiences. According to psychoanalysis, we as individuals are generally unaware of our psychological problems; as a result, we tend to explain away challenges using readily available yet mostly incorrect explanations (for example, bad luck, another person's malevolent intentions, or conspiracy).

Psychoanalysis teaches that we all have potential weaknesses rooted in our childhood experiences, and such weaknesses make us more or less vulnerable to character attacks. Despite its methodological weaknesses (such as the lack of experimental research and the deficiency of quantifiable, evidence-based treatment methods), psychoanalysis offers several potentially useful assumptions related to “the self” and various psychological means of protecting the individual who is attacked. For instance, a person's emotional suffering caused by a character attack (like persistent and derogatory name-calling posted on social networks) occurs when the target cannot launch effective behavioural or psychological responses to the assault. In such cases, individuals are expected to automatically unleash unconscious protective shields (called “defence mechanisms”) to deal with their unpleasant or traumatic experiences. Such defence mechanisms can be effective because they often allow the individual to avoid the negative impact of the attack, including by blaming someone or something else for his or her own personal problems. Yet defence mechanisms can also be ineffective or even futile. For instance, if a person accuses others of being “mean” or “evil,” this action can hinder the person's other efforts to seek effective responses to the attacks. In such cases, the individual's emotional suffering continues because the problem has not been successfully addressed. However, help can be sought: psychoanalysis

is rooted in the assumption that only a trained and certified professional can help alleviate the negative emotional consequences of character attacks.

Narcissism is another concept that exemplifies the psychoanalytic approach. It stands for the symbolic destruction of an individual's "good" image and his or her inability to deal emotionally with this symbolic damage. Narcissism is not an illness (though it may in some cases be diagnosed as Narcissistic Personality Disorder) but rather a personality trait, which is a stable emotional, cognitive, and behavioural pattern. In a nutshell, people labelled *narcissistic* are prone to vanity, which is the excessive belief in their social superiority, outstanding talents, or irresistible appeal to others. They persistently crave being the centre of attention and believe that they are entitled to care, special conditions, and perks unavailable to other people. They are often manipulative and capricious. However, people with narcissistic features feel trapped between their own imagined talents, beauty, and magnificence, on the one hand, and emotional disconnection from other people, on the other (Makhovskaya and Marchenko, 2014; Pinsky and Young, 2009).

Narcissism is not a marginal phenomenon affecting few people. Studies suggest that narcissism has been a growing social tendency (Twenge and Campbell, 2009), a fact that creates favourable conditions for character attacks. People with narcissistic individual traits tend to take attacks and criticisms too much to heart. Therefore, a character attack against them often becomes too traumatic to be overcome by standard means such as ignoring. To such individuals, a character attack – whether justified or not – requires a public response. This often leads to an escalation of the problem and even a new conflict. In the face of a character attack, a person with narcissistic tendencies may turn around and find a target of their own attack as a form of retaliation (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998).

Because narcissism as a personality trait should be present – to some degree – in all individuals, we all are, according to the psychoanalytic view, vulnerable to character attacks. The depth and scope of such vulnerability depends on the extent of an individual's narcissism. In theory, the less narcissism is present, the less the impact of a character attack.

While psychoanalysis is rooted mostly in clinical practice and observations, a more advanced approach to studying the traumatic impact of character assassination is based on empirical research and experimentation.

The Cognitive Approach

The character of George Washington, the first US president, was blazingly attacked in 1776. In a classic example of "fake news," a series of forged letters to the British king – most likely written by his enemies and falsely attributed to him – made Washington appear weak, indecisive, uncertain, and apologetic. At the time, Washington ignored this spurious and fabricated slander. However, two decades later, when these fake letters reappeared in new publications, Washington was deeply frustrated and felt emotionally disturbed (Ford, Randolph and Vadrill, 2012). What prompted such a different emotional reaction after so many years?

Cognitive psychologists (including social psychologists) tend to provide a reliable scientific foundation for the study of psychological trauma. We can apply their findings to look at the psychological impact of character attacks. The cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) as well as the attribution approach (Kelley, 1979) and the personal constructs approach (Kelly, 1955), in particular, should allow us to draw preliminary conclusions about the negative impact of character attacks on the individual in various social contexts. These models provide consistent empirical evidence about why some individuals "under character attack" experience emotional harm, whereas others do not. In short, the cognitive theory suggests that some people develop a set of beliefs and assumptions that make them more vulnerable to attacks than other individuals.

Unlike psychoanalysts, cognitive and social psychologists do not necessarily turn to early childhood experiences. They suggest that individual beliefs are constructed and developed based on the subjective rules of common sense. According to cognitive psychologists, every individual attempts to create many subjective social constructs or attitudes in order to maintain a balanced, non-contradictory view of the social world. This makes sense: People tend to avoid an unpleasant state of tension within themselves when they witness inconsistencies and contradictions typical of their experiences. Challenging the postulates of psychoanalysis, social and cognitive psychologists argue that it is only natural for an individual to maintain a balanced view of the world. This is a set of beliefs in which things appear quite logical: For instance, good deeds are rewarded, and evil acts are punished.

Turning to the subject of this chapter, a character attack should challenge or even damage an individual's balanced picture of the world and the self. To illustrate, if you assume that you are a good and reasonable person, any message that callously challenges this assumption should be evaluated as unpleasant. It should require action. First, you can totally ignore the attack. Second, you can create an ad hoc theory as to why this attack is untrue or irrelevant (it may, for instance, be driven by the selfish motives of another person). Third, however, if neither rejection nor explanation works for you, the character attack creates an inner psychological state of misbalance and emotional tension: "How could they do this to me?" Under this last set of circumstances, character assassination can actually "work," becoming a destructive psychological force.

We cannot know exactly why Washington was so disturbed about the character attacks against him (the forged letters) twenty years after they had first emerged. Yet based on the cognitive approach, we can suggest that Washington's psychological constructs (attitudes) had changed by the end of his life, at which time he became very concerned about his political legacy and his historical reputation, whereas he had previously been less sensitive to other people's views of him (see Ford, Randolph and Vadrill, 2012).

Individual Vulnerabilities and Thresholds

A damaging article posted on a site or an insulting picture uploaded to a social network produce different impacts under different circumstances. In the face of character attacks, some individuals seek and find inner emotional and cognitive resources to activate protective psychological mechanisms or barriers. Others are at a loss and emotionally suffer from the attacks (Masten and Narayan, 2012). Why do some people develop such protective barriers or shields while others do not?

Let's introduce the concept of the *individual threshold* to the study of character assassination. The term "threshold" is rooted in classical psychological studies of sensation. In traditional psychology, a sensory threshold refers to the minimum amount of signal necessary to produce a sensation. In the context of character attacks, we assume that certain individuals – because of their background or their current social circumstances – have relatively high thresholds and are thus likely to be immune to (or feel relatively unaffected by) character attacks (Icks and Shiraev, 2018). People with low thresholds are more vulnerable; they tend to be more sensitive to any information that attempts to discredit, criticise, or convey a negative view of them. Psychological science suggests that some people have a stable individual features or traits called *neuroticism*: persistent vigilance and caution. These individuals tend to see threats in circumstances and signals that other people easily ignore. As such, a simple act of criticism can provoke a strong emotional reaction in them. At the other end of the spectrum, individuals who measure low on neuroticism tend to respond less to threatening signals and pay less attention to character attacks.

Contemporary studies also reveal the existence of so-called latent vulnerability traits, which are specific behavioural and psychological features that individuals develop during any period

in life (e.g., bad habits, substance use or abuse, a propensity to make impulsive decisions, or self-damaging behaviour). These features may later develop into stable traits that impede an individual's capacity to cope with stressors (Beauchaine and Marsh, 2006). John Curtin and colleagues showed, for example, that an alcohol or a drug habit could be a latent vulnerability trait for some people: when a difficult life situation arises, they turn to substances rather than addressing the problem (Curtin, McCarthy, Piper and Baker, 2005). Very often, an individual's desire for social acceptance is a key mechanism determining why people tend to fight for their good reputation (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998).

Adjustment and Coping

Personality traits such as neuroticism develop early in life but can change over the course of an individual's lifespan. However, people are not mechanical "responding devices" that react to external signals only in the way they have been programmed to. People can adjust to and cope with external stressors. Adjustment refers to relatively significant changes in an individual's behaviour in response to external and internal challenges. Adjustment is somewhat similar to coping, which is a deliberate and conscious effort to adapt to challenges, varying situations, and new conditions, but adjustment is not necessarily conscious and deliberate. Research on *psychology of adjustment* provides knowledge about problems and conditions that cause people's need for adjustment, their psychological mechanisms of adjustment, and ways to help people cope. Several findings from this research are applicable here.

What do we do when we face stressors or significant challenges in our lives? There are four main strategies: Two relate to the individual; the other two, to the social environment.

Some people avoid dealing with stressful events, whereas others tend to confront them. Some individuals cope by transforming their personal features, including their habits and traits; others remain stubborn and unchanged. Research shows that people choose different coping strategies based on their age, experience, social support, and education (Folkman et al., 1987; Powell, 2015). In addition, there are many seemingly small variables and ever-changing circumstances that may affect the way people adjust and cope.

In the face of a stressor, we can choose – if we think logically – between two alternatives: changing something internally (such as altering our own thinking, emotional responses, and behaviour) or changing little, if at all. The choice between these two strategies ("To change or not to change?") depends on our personality as well as on specific circumstances and context. In the first case, coping will require some personal transformation and correction. New assessments of the stressors should be made, and innovative responses found. A change of habits and even personality features may be required.

Which challenges – or stressors – do we accept, and which do we contest? This discussion has been going on in the social sciences and humanities for centuries. Some philosophers in the past called for the individual's active engagement in life events in attempts to transform them. Others called for more wisdom and acceptance of one's fate. Both sides offered reasonable arguments in defence of their positions: On the one hand, we should be able to overcome life's challenges by standing tall against them; on the other, there are many challenges that we are incapable of overcoming, so we should not falsely believe that we can resolve every problem and negotiate every obstacle. Online trolls, for example, do not care about the strength or logic of their target's arguments. The trolls' goal is to have fun and destroy the opponent by any means necessary. Many innocent victims of troll attacks wrongly believe that logic and common sense will prevail and then are disappointed (and often deeply traumatised) by quite unreasonable, humiliating attacks against them.

Coping and adjustment can be active or passive, with many gradations between these two alternatives. At one end of the imaginary spectrum is *approaching*, which is a type of coping that refers to deliberate attempts to change oneself as well as the sources of stress. A person who is approaching is seeking internal (their own) and external (others') resources to deal with a stressor or problem (Zeidner and Endler, 1995). Approaching involves cognitive operations, such as thinking, as well as actions. Approaching can be proactive when an individual is aware of a problem or anticipates the emergence of a stressor and thus has one or more strategies for dealing with it. For instance, a person may construct an attitude that is rooted in the assumption that character attacks are inevitable and therefore one has to have a range of strategies for actively dealing with them. Approaching can be mostly behavioural (involving actions), mostly cognitive (involving thinking), or a combination of the two.

Coping may also take the form of *avoiding*, which is keeping oneself from having to address a challenge or stressor. There are several types of avoidant behaviour. Avoidant behaviour can be rational, which means that we consciously try to discount or ignore an apparent problem even after we become aware of it. Many of us avoid paying attention to criticisms and online attacks because we understand that we have little time, desire, or opportunity to address them. On the other hand, avoiding can be a way of hiding from a problem. This often leads to the escalation of the initial problem because the original stressor (a character attack) is not addressed. Avoiding can be behavioural (not doing anything to address the problem), cognitive (not thinking about the problem), or both. Avoiding can take the form of compensatory behaviour, which may distract the individual from addressing the stressor. Very often, it is an effective strategy. However, as research shows, such behaviour is often associated with painful outcomes (Filipkowski and Smyth, 2012; Williams, Ciarrochi and Heaven, 2012). For example, approximately two in five adults in America report overeating unhealthy foods in the past month because of continuing stress including personal insults or criticisms (American Psychological Association, 2015). Avoiding can also be a result of a person's lack of knowledge and understanding, deliberate ignorance ("I don't even want to know"), inability to correctly assess the problem and its significance, or individual psychological vulnerabilities, including mental illness. Individuals can develop a victim mentality, assuming that the entire world is against them, nobody understands them, and their problems are so unique that nobody can help.

Passive adjustment, or passive coping, is a general pattern of relying on others to address or resolve stressful events or life situations. This pattern of dependency is rooted in an individual's feeling of helplessness and his or her inability to deal with the stressor. Those who engage in passive coping tend to relinquish control of the stressful situation to others, wanting others to help them find the best way of coping (Carroll, 2013).

Coping has a continuum of outcomes, ranging from successful to unsuccessful. On one end of the spectrum, successful coping responses allow an individual to maintain a happy and productive life, score high on the measures of subjective well-being (happiness), and be free of symptoms of distress. The modern psychological theory of coping also shows that a few practical suggestions – involving education, educational training, self-coping, and counselling – on how to practically address the traumatic impact of character attacks can be helpful.

Even in ancient times, philosophers in India, China, and Greece stated that many individuals had a distorted way of looking at things and could not effectively cope with difficulties (Isaeva, 1999). Modern research provides supporting evidence for those philosophical assertions. As with "helpful" traits, there are also features that negatively affect coping. Consider procrastination. Research shows that constant procrastination becomes maladaptive for an individual's coping strategies, especially if a person is measured high on impulsivity and low on self-discipline (Jaffe, 2013). People who procrastinate persistently create false excuses based on the assumption that

turning to their problem (such as an insult against them) later is a better choice (Pychyl et al., 2000). Social conditions may also unfavourable to addressing the trauma, as was the case for the millions of women who suffered from insults and harassment and did not reveal the problem for fear of a social backlash against them.

Consistent cognitive distortions can also negatively affect the coping process. These are thoughts and assumptions rooted in negative emotions that cause individuals to perceive reality somewhat inaccurately (Burns, 1989). A political candidate, for example, may be angry that the mocking online comments about her speech patterns (such as using many unnecessary words, like “you know,” “well,” or “something like that”) are unfair and even rude. Instead of changing her speech patterns, she is now emotionally preoccupied with her anger against her attackers. To take another example, consider consistent catastrophic thinking – the stable tendency of an individual to overestimate the probability of very negative outcomes. People who are prone to this type of thinking tend to focus on their negative emotions, a process that is called *rumination*. These individuals see threats when there are few or none. They tend to exaggerate minor threats and to be dispositional pessimists – people who have the general and stable belief that bad things will happen and negative outcomes occur.

Catastrophic thinking as a thought pattern has been linked to certain personality characteristics. Psychologists, for example, refer to the Type D personality (*D* stands for *distressed* in cognitive and behavioural terms). The Type D personality is linked to the persistent tendency toward negative affect (being constantly irritable, anxious and expecting failure) and social inhibition (which involves both self-restraint and a lack of self-assurance). This type is also associated with the development of burnout (Shirayev, 2016).

What do individuals think, feel, or experience as a result of the attack against them? How long do these effects persist? How does this individual cope with the psychological consequences of the attack? How does a character attack change the individual’s decisions, and why do individuals who suffer from character assassination make certain decisions but not others? We have outlined a few preliminary answers to these and similar questions, and in describing them, we hope that we have sketched a few directions for future research in the field.

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