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"Body Leads": Medicalizing Cultural Difference, or, what are we doing when we Say Putin Has Asperger's Syndrome?

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By Cassandra Hartblay

A recent [USA Today](#) article described a report from a Department of Defense think tank study that suggested that President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin has “neurological abnormalities” and, perhaps, an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The report, part of a project entitled “Body Leads,” which claims to use analysis of bodily behavior to suggest underlying neurological states, was originally written in 2008, and made public through a reporter’s Freedom of Information Act request. The report became the subject of the USA Today article, which, published at a moment when US-Russia diplomatic relations are at a low point over ongoing violence in Ukrainian territory, seemed pitched to create a sensationalist media frenzy.

Indeed, the original report, which became available through various [blogs](#), is itself sensationalist, and, sensationally poorly crafted. The argument presented in the document is of such low quality it is somewhat befuddling that it has received any attention at all. Although the report was allegedly created under the auspices of a federal government funded think tank its authority is marred by rampant grammatical errors, sloppy organization, poor application of theoretical concepts, unprofessional combination of methods and research sources, and general confusion about key psychology concepts. Indeed, it would have hardly passed an upper level undergraduate course in psychology or global studies, let alone be accepted by any peer reviewed professional journal.

The poor quality of the report itself seems to be the original reason for the FOIA request: the DOD think tank that produced the report came under media scrutiny in 2014. An article in Politico and other commentaries have suggested that the small organization was an ineffectual ideological holdover from a previous era, citing the “Body Leads” report as evidence.

Yet, this original intention behind the media’s move to publicize the report has taken a backseat to popular response to the seemingly face value claim presented in the USA Today article title: that a US government agency said that Putin has Asperger’s. The response, in the days

following the article's publication came from two major constituencies: the Russian media, and the neurodiversity and autism advocacy communities. These constituencies insert this article into broader debates about, respectively, the trend in US media and defense discourse of demonizing Putin as a person and a leader, and the stigmatizing implication of using ASD diagnoses to characterize individuals as suspect, untrustworthy, and other, stigmatizing an already disadvantaged community.

To be clear, I don't think the report itself does merit much attention; however, I am interested in the broader response to the document in the few days following the USA Today article. I find this convergence interesting, not only because I happen to be someone who studies disability and Russia, and disability in Russia, but because my attention to those subjects has led me to be curious about the ways in which disability stigma gets reproduced on a global scale.

Particularly, I'm interested in whether or if the two lines of reasoning entangled here – the stigmatization of a particular diagnostic category, and the racialization of a foreign leader – and the ways these ideas circulate in public debate, may have more in common than is immediately obvious. This critique of the popular response to the Body Leads report is related to an underlying anthropological objection to the content of the report itself: the medicalization of behavior that is better described as cultural difference. I argue that this episode offers a very specific type of pathologization, and propose that it may serve us well to have a specific name for this mode of applying stigma to both an individual and medicalized population.

The Russian media response

The Russian media have broadly, and I would say, quite correctly, described the report as “an attempt to demonize Putin” (gazeta.ru). [US foreign policy](#) and Area Studies communities of various political persuasions have overwhelmingly agreed. When Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, was asked to comment by American media, he said, “This is stupidity, not deserving of commentary.”

And yet, naturally, the Russian media was quick to call on pundits and Russian autism experts to weigh in on and spin the story. The state-run online news source gazeta.ru cited Russian political pundit Aleksei Makarin's assertion that “this line of garbage translates to the American public the idea that ‘the Russian president has such a problem that it is impossible or very difficult to come to an agreement with him, and this is not the result of geopolitics, but of psychology.’” In fact, I agree with this assessment.

If there was any doubt about the perception of autism in Russian society, the response to the accusation that Putin carries such a diagnosis has definitively and profoundly described a society that considers autism and ASD people not only deviant but downright dangerous. The gazeta.ru article cited a Russian psychologist's characterization of ASD:

People with this syndrome are different in that they have a very low emotional intellect, that is, in the most obvious expression, low emotionality and sociality. Regular and totally ordinary things the rest of us don't even pay attention to— rituals, cooperation with others, tenderness, and emotional expression—all of these work very poorly for them.

This explanation is given as a way of stating that obviously no individual with such characteristics could possibly have achieved a high level position in the Russian government, be charged with leading a country, or in general function as a social actor. That is, in the Russian media response, while Putin is defended, he is done so at the expense of the social personhood of anyone with an ASD diagnosis.

The ASD and Neurodiversity Response

As the Russian media response makes clear, the Body Leads report seems aimed only to insult and dehumanize Putin. Yet the unintentional discursive effect of the media coverage served— in both Russia and the US—to further stigmatize and pathologize people with ASD.

Russianist and ASD parent-advocate Eliot Borenstein put it,

It's one thing to pathologize a world leader, and quite another to find one's own medical, psychological, or social status invoked as a pathology. The implication is not only that Putin is difficult and deviant because of an alleged diagnosis, but that the diagnosis itself not only is, but *must* be seen as a stigma.

Elsewhere around the internet, neurodiversity and ASD advocates were [dismayed](#) and disturbed by the outright hateful and discriminatory attitudes toward people with ASD diagnoses that the story prompted in [comment threads](#), Twitter feeds, and Facebook posts. Disability advocacy organizations were quick to post links and [follow the story](#). In particular, the neurodiversity movement seeks to de-stigmatize ASD by reframing neurological difference not as pathological, but as a natural component of human diversity—variation, which, in given situations may offer a strength rather than a weakness. This high profile example of how psychological notions of abnormality and difference can be invoked to pathologize

individuals and groups of people offered an example of precisely the types of discursive discussion that neurodiversity advocates argue can be demeaning to ASD diagnosed people. Akin to the ways in which the intellectual disability community, in recent years, has organized campaigns to urge fellow citizens to refrain from using the “R-Word” (retarded) as an insult, the Body Leads fiasco was a powerful reminder that to call someone autistic, remains, for many, a slur.

Pathologizing Discourse, Pathologizing Culture

For anthropologists, perhaps one of the most jarring elements of reading the Body Leads is the repeated use of cross-cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication as evidence of Putin’s alleged neurological abnormality.

In one glaring case, the Body Leads report draws on an interview published in a Time Magazine, which was billed as an introduction to Putin for the American readership. Taking the descriptions from the article as evidence, the Body Leads report states that

Putin’s neurological perception is challenged and autism experts say this can manifest in hypersensitivity, social shyness and behavioral withdrawal from stimulation. [...] Here’s another description of the Russian President’s affect during the interaction [from a Time Magazine article]:

‘He is impatient to the point of rudeness with small talk’

‘Charm is not part of his presentation of self—he makes no effort to be ingratiating. One senses that he pays constant obeisance to a determined inner discipline.’

‘... he misread several of our attempts at playfulness.’

‘Putin himself is sardonic but humorless. In our hours together, he didn’t attempt a joke...’

Theoretically Putin’s brain behavior abnormalities affect his social engagement and defensive behaviors, including, sensing whether the environment is safe or, others trustworthy.

Before we can get to the deeper importance of the logic in this passage, I must first state that the passage muddles ASD diagnostic criteria with the theory of the polyvagal nervous system, mischaracterizes autistic or people with ASD as unable to trust others, and draws on descriptions of

Putin in a popular journalism article in order to make a neurological diagnosis.

This last issue begins to get at the heart of the matter that I'd like to highlight. The journalist's description of Putin that is excerpted here was *intended* to present Putin to American readers as a quintessentially Russian leader. It therefore intentionally presented several tropes of Russian-American cultural mismatch: that humor may be lost in translation, that Russian conversational style is often taken to be abrupt by Americans, and that Russians prefer silence to small talk or talking for the sake of talking, perceiving it to be an indication that someone is not taking a situation seriously, while Americans perceive small talk as an important social lubricant.

We could imagine the absurdity of a report from the Kremlin that stated, based on a journalistic description of the differences between American and Russian cultural behaviors, e.g. that Obama's penchant for smiling broadly when greeting people at the commencement of serious proceedings is a sign of poor mental faculties, a failure to grasp the gravity of a situation, or that he is possibly drunk (as Russian cultural logics would read these behaviors). Of course, this is not "science" but it would be a reasonable interpretation for a Russian to make were someone to act like an American in a social setting.

The Body Leads report claims to interpret bodily movements and facial expressions as indicative of underlying neurological traits. Nowhere does the report recognize that bodily movements, embodied modes of communication, and habits like facial expressions and posture are shaped by culture and upbringing as well as by biology.

Anthropologists have long observed that how close people stand to one another when they talk, how they modulate the volume of their voice to convey importance, and what settings they consider appropriate for particular types of social interactions are culturally mediated. That is, they depend on one's social class, one's upbringing, the learned modes of social interactions and norms and expectations of one's peers. What all world leaders must grapple with is the problem of establishing communication with their peers who have come from a background with wholly different of social norms of communication.

Taken at face value the Body Leads report suggests that it is permissible to ignore variable cultural norms when interpreting behavior, a proposition which most psychologists and certainly anthropologists, would reject. Moreover, the report suggests that cultural habits such as conversational style and bodily comportment can be used as evidence of inferiority.

In a section of the report, the author misrepresents an explanation of a neuroscience finding about brain function – called the polyvagal theory – to suggest that Putin operates with a “more primitive” section of his brain than other, or, normally developed humans. The report quotes research psychiatrist Dr. Stephen Porges, suggesting that “Putin is primarily perceiving and expressing himself from the earlier adaptive fight/flight or flee stages of behavior” (2008:5). It is probably the case that Dr. Porges was taken out of context [I was not successful in reaching him to comment]. His reference to “earlier adaptive stages” is a rhetorical shorthand for referencing particular neurological structures, or elements of the brain. He is attempting to make clear for other scientists which particular part of the brain he is referencing; a neuroscientist or psychologist, when they say ‘the reptilian brain,’ do not necessarily mean to imply that the functions of that neurological component are pathological, but rather that they are shared between a great many species, including reptiles, as well as mammals. But suggesting a fight or flight behavioral pattern does seem to suggest a lesser-evolved functional capacity than those who might make other, more socially adept, choices. And, this is precisely how the Body Leads report interprets this comment: that Putin’s autistic, reptilian, primitive, developmentally abnormal brain leads to pathological behavior.

Pathologizing Enemies

As many others have already pointed out, the report seems nearly solely intended to pathologize Putin’s behavior as a way of undermining his credibility as a leader. Strangely, when Body Leads does offer policy advice, it comes oddly close to recommending cultural sensitivity:

Those that work with him in Russia or, from abroad like US officials will likely benefit by offering him recommendations that proffer a set of tested data that result in one outcome and alternatively, another recommendation with facts that may produce a different outcome — in order to get his attention. Otherwise, unsubstantiated recommendations may be lost in his perceptual system that simply has trouble taking in information differently.[sic] (14)

In this iteration, difference and adaptability can only be conceptualized as an individual pathology. Body Leads ascribes that difference not to social class, or cultural norms, or expectations for diplomatic interaction, but to neurobiological elements of Putin the physical body, which is posited as outside of culture, or, which amounts to the same, as existing in an single cultural system of Euroamerican normative imagination.

As Borenstein observed,

This is far from the first time that Western elites have entertained themselves with long-distance diagnosis of Russian leaders. If some scholars and pundits are to be believed, we can understand both [Peter the Great](#) and [Lenin as victims of syphilis](#), and Ivan the Terrible as suffering from either [encephalitis](#) or [mercury poisoning](#) (somebody alert Jenny McCarthy!) And don't even get me started on Stalin.

Setting aside the neo-Cold War implications of a revived discourse of Putin-as-Enemy, which has emerged in full-force in recent years and especially since the Russian Annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, there is a particular tradition of Euroamerican enemy-making that seeks to vilify a foreigner or foreign leader by depicting him as subhuman. This tactic is at the core of how enemies are created aesthetically and discursively. Such a tack has been used historically against newly arrived immigrant classes in the United States, by the US hyper-conservatives against Barack Obama, and against foreign leaders in wartime. A [recent Reddit thread](#) responding to the Putin-ASD topic argues as much, noting that “psychology from a distance” becomes a means of casting a political-ideological slur.

To vilify a person or group by implying subhuman or “lesser-evolved” characteristics can be understood as a component of what critical race theorists call racialization. Racialization describes a tactic of characterizing that a group of people in terms of biological traits and ethnic identity, in such a way so as to assert that this group does not belong to some other social whole. A primary tactic of racialization is asserting the biological absurdity or inferiority of this now-defined group, serving to legitimize political dominance over it. The move to diagnosis Putin as psychologically abnormal in the Body Leads report seems to fit into this schema.

Medical anthropologists have long recognized a related process, medicalization. Medicalization occurs when experts redefine social or cultural characteristics into individual pathologies in need of medical control or management. From a critical perspective, medicalization describes instances in which that medicine and science become systems of social control or the implementation of power. Those whose bodies are the subject of medicalization are described as unruly or undisciplined, and in need of therapeutic intervention in order to assimilate them with — or keep them from disrupting — the normative social order.

What I think Putin's alleged ASD suggests is that we need a new term, one that sits somewhere between racialization and medicalization. This term should describe **a specific form of pathologization that has to do with the use of stigmatized disabilities to dehumanize the both the**

accused and those bearers of the stigmatized diagnosis. Like racialization, this posits an evolutionary telos or progress in which the accused is behind or deficient, and like medicalization, it uses medical authority to assert the right to speak about others' bodies and behaviors. I want to suggest that we might call this mode of pathologization *disorderization*.

Like racialization, disorderization posits an evolutionary telos with respect to which the accused is behind or deficient. But while racialization is a process that applies to groups of people, like medicalization, disorderization locates deficiency in an individual body. Cultural behavior is at once biologized and treated as deviant. Disorderization is a mode of thinking that misconstrues social and cultural dynamics as rooted in individual, rather than racially shared, biological difference. This is a brand of pathologization that takes its cues from a sort of biological determinism in which the cultural disappears and all behaviors and habits are rooted in medically-defined bodily systems. By biological determinism, I mean a misapplication of what psychology as a discipline calls *behaviorism*; psychology's focus on observable behaviors exhibited by an individual goes uncontextualized in terms of broader cultural norms and biology is always the underlying cause of all social behaviors. Where racialization pathologizes social groups or individuals within those groups by applying medical diagnostics to the group as a whole, and medicalization pathologizes individuals by ignoring social forces, disorderization pathologizes both the group – ASD individuals – and the implicated individual – Vladimir Putin.

A *disorder* implies both a medical condition of abnormality that is less-than or out-of-synch-with or fails-to-achieve some medically established normative baseline. As many in disability studies and anthropology have demonstrated, the medically normative body is a construct based on the abstractions of statistics and does not exist in reality. *Disorder* also implies chaos, or a failure to align with expectations and norms. Expectations and norms are always embedded in cultural systems. People whose behavior consciously or unconsciously defies cultural norms of order—whether because they have a different cultural background, because their bodies refuse to conform to biological standards, or because they have consciously chosen to defy norms—are often branded disorderly. In this sense, a mode of pathologizing called *disorderization* would describe all of these elements.

Some might argue that medicalization encompasses both disorderization and racialization; others will suggest that medicalization is always a component of racialization, and that there is nothing special about the Putin ASD scenario as an instance of racialization (except, perhaps, that Americans often don't notice that they are racializing Russians, who are

considered to be Caucasian). My point is that there is a certain pattern to pairing medicalized traits and racialized inferiority that has implications for both bearers of the medicalized trait, and for bearers of the group identity in question. It is this intersection that I am highlighting; we might consider disorderization, then, a specific form of both racialization and medicalization. A schoolyard bully calls another kid a queer or a retard; a plastic surgeon advertises eyelid surgery for Asian Americans; a college student remarks to her friend that she is “so ADHD right now.” The oppressive weight of these utterances is intentionally directed at one subject, and, as a side effect, contributes to the medical stigmatization of another. I find this pattern to be worthy of analysis in its own right; I would call it disorderization.

And that, I argue, is precisely what we are doing when we say that Vladimir Putin has Asperger’s Syndrome.

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