

**DMRDynamics**

**David M. Reiss, M.D.**  
**Psychiatry**

Adult Psychiatry  
*Borderline- Spectrum Disorders*

Medical-Legal Evaluations  
*Qualified Medical Examiner*  
*Agreed Medical Evaluations*

Character and Personality Dynamics  
*Consulting*  
*Sports / Entertainment*

Direct: 858.204.8783  
866.428.9939  
Office: 619.280.3422  
Fax: 619.280.3406

DMREISS@GMAIL.COM  
[WWW.DMRDynamics.COM](http://WWW.DMRDynamics.COM)

*Mailing Address:*  
P.O. Box 9684  
Rancho Santa Fe, CA  
92067-4684

*With Offices in:*  
San Diego, San Clemente,  
Palm Springs, Fresno

**THE 2008 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION –**

**CROSSING THE BORDERLINE:**

**A DEVELOPMENTAL/CHARACTEROLOGICAL CONSTRUCT**

**OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL PHENOMENA**

***David M. Reiss, M.D.***

*“Even as we grow old, grow big, and grow powerful, we have yet to grow up...  
Appealing lies take the place of uncomfortable truths...” Cornel West<sup>1</sup>*

**INTRODUCTION**

The socio-political-economic milieu of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been marked by ominous indications that phenomena which promote chaos and disaster are overwhelming forces of rationality, wisdom and stability.

Superficially observing the reaction of the popular society to different demarcations of classically defined sectors of the population, e.g., sectors defined by race, gender, religion, etc., it may be held that the socially dysfunctional processes of discrimination, repression, racism and bigotry may be undergoing a slow but steady positive transformation.

However, from a more comprehensive point of view, the ostensible progress toward the development of an effectively inclusive and equalitarian democratic social order remains under serious threat, and the progress which has occurred may be problematically fragile and transient.

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – CROSSING THE BORDERLINE**

David M. Reiss, M.D.

Page # 2

An analysis of the level of developmental maturity of the psychological factors which were involved in the 2008 U.S. demonstrates this conundrum. This paper focuses upon the impact upon recent socio-political processes of *irrationality*, as it is commonly displayed by essentially “normal” persons.

In a previous paper which I presented at the last Congress two years ago in Padua, I described a pragmatic schema of personality development, broken into five Stages of normal psychological/characterological development.

I described the second developmental Stage of “Malignant Narcissism”, during which the developing child – or the regressed/fixated adult – perceives the source of sustenance as an external entity that is expected to be magical and all-powerful (for good and/or evil). The person develops a sense of “good” and “evil” which is attributed to either the external entity and/or the self.

Rather than learning to problem-solve, the individual learns that to have needs met, one must: 1) completely identify with the loved and feared “omnipotent provider”; 2) conquer and replace that entity with a less hostile “omnipotent provider”; or, 3) constantly appease that entity, at the cost of any sacrifice demanded. Understandings of “good” and “evil” become distorted so that “being good” is very concretely identified with appeasing the omnipotent power, and “being evil” is equally as concretely identified with opposing the omnipotent power.

**Persons fixated at this Stage are essentially irrational – unresponsive to logical argument, debate, or factual analysis, other than offering platitudes and “explanations” that defy logic; or responding to confrontation with reflexive and digressive attacks. However, rather than being simply bystanders to sociopolitical process, they often tend to be ardent supporters of a particular point of view, yet incapable of reasoned discourse, compromise, or understandings issues which involve complexity or ambiguities. These persons imbue their political positions with a sense of self-righteousness and infallibility borne of their overt or covert belief in their own omnipotence, infallibility and immunity. Additionally, the more threatened these persons feel in their sense of omnipotence, the more fiercely they will defend their position, even at the cost of regressing into grossly illogical, unreasonable, manipulative, paranoid or violent positions. Consciously or unconsciously, they perceive their only other option (in the face of confrontation of their non-omnipotent humanity) to be a terrifyingly unacceptable collapse into utter and intolerable despair.**

It is my thesis that the central developmental Stage of our culture, the third Developmental Stage of “Shared Omnipotence.” There is a growing ability to appreciate that in dealing with the challenges of life, there are various interpersonal interactions with other imperfect human beings, with whom one must establish relationships.

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – CROSSING THE BORDERLINE**

David M. Reiss, M.D.

Page # 3

However, the wish for a sense of all-encompassing security and omnipotence has not yet been accepted as unrealistic, and there is an expectation that with a “perfectly” loving/caring relationship, albeit involving imperfect individuals, from that relationship, a mutually omnipotent protective power will arise.

Inherent to the basic position of this Stage of development, is the conscious or unconscious mind-set, **“I want you to give me what I need and want, and if you don't, it's not just that I am uncomfortable or that I'm frustrated, but I'm enraged and devastated, because you, as a person, have disappointed me, and not only have you hurt me, but you have destroyed my sense of there being any security in the world; without our Shared Omnipotence, the world is a treacherous, overwhelming place – both for me and for you!”**

This phenomenon has been depicted widely in the media, growing over the last few years, as the Bush administration has come under increasing criticism.

Similarly, on the other side, there has recently been an increasingly presence in the media and blogosphere of those who are looking for the new administration to confer upon them a state of Shared Omnipotence.

They already experiencing a disruptive sense of disappointed that the Obama administration has not immediately “delivered” that which was expected (unconsciously, Shared Omnipotence). In fact, perhaps only partially in jest or with a sense of irony, On June 12, 2009 Bill Maher expressed a longing for the very sense of *irrational* confidence/omnipotence which he previous devastatingly attacked, “What he [President Obama] needs in his personality is a little George Bush ... What we need to do is to marry the good ideas that Barack Obama has with a little bit of that Bush attitude and certitude.”<sup>4</sup>

It is my opinion that the majority of the population of our society actually are essentially functioning within the Stage of Shared Omnipotence. This is not to imply that the majority of the population suffers from a diagnosable “Borderline Personality Disorder”, which represents the lower, severely pathological end of the spectrum within this Stage; but rather, while avoiding most of the dangerous and severely disruptive pitfalls of what is clinically considered “borderline pathology”, the majority of the population has not fully and successfully worked through the desire for Shared Omnipotence, and tend to act out the longings for that state of being in at least some areas of their life and/or relationships, especially when under stress.

Relationships based upon the illusion of Shared Omnipotence also inevitably fail. Thus, party politics which play into this dynamic lead to an internally fractious process that cycles between periods of unrealistic hope and expectation, and periods of frustration, anger, rage and defensive denial, self-recrimination, guilt, and self-sabotage – or when those defenses fail, a depressive regression into passive ineffectiveness and despair.

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – *CROSSING THE BORDERLINE***

**David M. Reiss, M.D.**

Page # 4

A confounding issue that occurs in domestic politics within the United States is that the voting population, in general, is split almost equally between the Republican and the Democratic Parties. At different periods of time, and under different socio-political and socio-economic influences, one party or the other may appear to gain the advantage, but for the most part, neither party can claim to be consistently predominant. Especially looking at the Presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, it can be seen that (ignoring the electoral vote), the population itself was quite evenly divided. Even regarding the election of 2008, which was relatively “decisive”, in fact, the results were determined by a relatively small percentage of voters who “swung” to the Democratic side.

Due to the situation of a split electorate, and the fact that the United States government certainly is, for all practical purposes, a two-party system, the ultimately deciding factor in recent elections has been the voting pattern of the relatively small percentage of “undecideds” – not only those who whose party allegiances are not fixed, but those who make their voting decision relatively late in the campaign process. In that regard, the population can be broken down into various constituencies which are mirror-images on both sides of the political spectrum:

The “base” of each party commits quite early on – for the most part, even prior to the beginning of the campaigns. Campaigns realize the necessity to “solidify the base”, and to “get out the vote” – but those are essentially issues of mobilizing people to cast their vote, rather than needing to convince those persons as to which candidate to vote for.

Those who are not part of the “base”, but who are involved in a more analytical, logical consideration of the issues, may or may not be definitively aligned with either party, but those persons are likely to make a decision relatively early in the campaign process, as the issues and the stances of the candidates become clear. Again, campaigns recognize the necessity to keep those persons involved through the day of actually casting their votes – but the consideration of issues and philosophies, the debating process, the presentation of different points of view – has largely become irrelevant to those persons at a relatively early stage. Their level of excitement and enthusiasm for a particular candidate or party may wax or wane, (and thus, their ability to affect other “swing voters” may vary), but since they have already thought through the basic political and philosophical issues reasonably early in the political campaign process, they are unlikely to change their decision during the course of the campaign.

This leaves those who remain undecided until the late stages as constituting the “deciding factor” in determining the outcome of close political races. Yet by definition, and through reference to the

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – *CROSSING THE BORDERLINE***

David M. Reiss, M.D.

Page # 5

considerations of personality characteristics discussed – by and large, these are persons who will be voting largely based upon emotional factors, based upon seeking a sense of Shared Omnipotence with their political idols, rather voting based upon an objective analytical consideration of the facts. That is, the majority of the late-deciding swing voters – who are thrown in the position of literally being the “king makers” – are those who rely most heavily on *irrational* emotional factors in their decision-making, factors which emerge out of the dysfunctional aspects of personality structures functioning at the level of Stage 3.

Thus, in close elections, including 2008, not only is the ultimate result often very heavily weighted to the last-minute *irrational* emotional reactions of a relatively small percentage of the population, but of course, informed and sophisticated campaigns understand this (on a practical level, even if not on a deeper psychological level), and thus, the campaigns are largely “managed” to solidify the base and “logical” voters early on, and then in the closing months or weeks, to attract the “emotional” “undecided” voters. This phenomenon significantly impacts the entire positioning and strategy of the campaign, and even the selection of candidates, as well as the “attitudes” “spin” and “persona” that the candidates and campaigns adopt. Campaigning to attract voters who maintain a desire for Shared Omnipotence thereby dysfunctionally informs and pressures the actual policy positions and actions of the Parties and the Candidates, of the “necessity” to attract the swing voters. Candidates then may consciously and/or unconsciously relish forming a relationship of Shared Omnipotence with the electorate.

Thus, from the point of view of gaining and holding power, (from either the right or the left), maintaining a divided and angry electorate which is disparaging of “the other side”, psychodynamically re encourages the illusion of needing to enter a relationship which will confer a sense of Shared Omnipotence; and thereby may attract the attention of the most practically important “swing” voters.

The current political and economic situation places us at a point in history where we are confronted daily with concrete indications that both as individuals and as a society we have suffered losses that have severely threatened any fantasy of omnipotence or shared omnipotence. In a sense, this episode of confrontation by reality began on September 11, 2001, through the hurricanes, corruption, economic crash.

This phenomenon knows no political boundaries. For example, on the left side of the spectrum, there are those who have imbued President Obama with an almost mystical power to effect needed “change”. On one hand Obama has overtly denied, modestly refuted, and didactically has insisted that he does not perceive himself or his powers in that manner; but arguably, a sub-theme of his campaign and Presidency has surreptitiously encouraged aspects of just that type of grandiosity. On the right side of the spectrum, devoid of even the protestations of modesty of Obama, certain demagogues have overtly attempted to channel social malaise into rejuvenated omnipotent cult-like followings.

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – CROSSING THE BORDERLINE**

David M. Reiss, M.D.

Page # 6

During the 2004 election cycle, playing directly into the dynamics of seeking omnipotence, the Republican “spin” overtly labeled any acknowledgment of complexity as an indication of “weakness”. In reality, understanding the risks and limitations in dealing with highly complex and dangerous situations represents intellectual and practical strength – and can only be seen as “weak” in comparison to an *illusory* position of omnipotence. At the same time, the Democratic “spin” dared not risk threatening the desire for omnipotence/shared omnipotence within the Party’s own political base or the “undecideds”, and therefore responded by trying to “prove” the “strength” of Senator Kerry (e.g. vis-à-vis his Vietnam experience). In essence, the process regressed into an implicit conspiracy to force the electorate to choose between competing illusory solutions – to adopt a position *focused upon emotion rather than reason*.

Through the 2008 primary campaign, and then extending into the general election, in retrospect, it can be interpreted that to a large extent, there was a powerful battle between forces and positions that encouraged and promised a return to the previous level of security by essentially again using “reasonably adaptive” but functionally immature defenses, re-enforcing and mildly re-working the status quo to regain stability (e.g., at least on an *emotional* basis, relying upon a return to “conservative values”; or a return to “the Clinton years”), versus those who acknowledged that the status quo was no longer tolerable and acceptable, as in fact, the crisis was far more severe than the “usual adaptive defenses” could contain. Through the primaries, John McCain gathered support as the “maverick” who was going to challenge the system; and Barak Obama focused his entire campaign upon the need for “change”. *After* the primaries were effectively over, Obama reinforced (and arguably exploited) his promise of Shared Omnipotence through the need for a systemic “change”, while the McCain campaign, for all practical purposes, while attempting to maintain the “maverick” image, rather transparently retreated towards supporting a re-working of the status quo, to “bring back” the lost sense of security.

It is not surprising that those “swing voters” spurned a return to even a “re-worked” status quo, and supported the call for systemic change. (I must reinforce that this is *not* a comment or critique of the actual political positions or policies of either candidate; these comments are related to the dynamics of the political process which *transcend and overwhelm* rational evaluation of political positions and policies.)

Obama’s writings, as well as some of Obama’s statements offer an argument can be made that he has been seeking to instill in the populace a realistic and *rational* sense of the severity of the current crisis, and a realistic and *rational* sense of his lack of omnipotence. Obama wrote in his introduction to “Dreams of My Father”, “If I’ve been able to fight off cynicism, I nevertheless like to think of myself as wise to the world, careful not to expect too much...”; In the prologue to The Audacity of Hope, “...the topic of this book: how we might begin the process of changing our politics and our civil life. This isn’t to say that I know exactly how to do it. I don’t... I offer no unifying theory of American government, nor do these ages provide a manifesto for action, complete with charts and graphs, timetables and ten point plans...” From the prologue of The

## **SOCIAL IRRATIONALITY – *CROSSING THE BORDERLINE***

**David M. Reiss, M.D.**

Page # 7

Audacity of Hope, "...I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them. Which perhaps indicates a second, more intimate theme to this book – namely, how I, or anybody in public office, can avoid the pitfalls of fame, the hunger to please, the fear of loss... [i.e., the seduction of the fantasy of Shared Omnipotence]"<sup>8</sup> Yet it is equally as obvious that there are forces at work (arguably intentionally and disingenuously) encouraged the fantasized sense of Omnipotence regarding Obama, notwithstanding his writings. At the same time, there are forces at work (quite obviously intentionally and disingenuously encouraged by opponents of the administration) which not only seek to immediately undermine any sense of Omnipotence, but also to maliciously undermine any respect for attempts by this administration to *rationaly* problem-solve through the crisis as effectively and possible; that the secretly pined for relief from chaos and grief, and re-establishment of a sense of omnipotence, would become available if only the Obama fails, and is replaced by those fostering a return to embracing Shared Omnipotence.

The political leadership cannot pretend that there exists an easy, safe, risk-free, cost-free path to follow. The political leadership must be able to readjust positions, as may be demanded by changing conditions and unexpected events. Problem solving and resolution of internal differences must occur through compromises based upon knowledge and logic, not illusory psychological defenses.

This is not an easy task. Encouraging the society to move towards maturity cannot be accomplished by one Party, or one President. The maturing process must simultaneously involve the participation of politicians, the media, industry/business and the population as a whole.

A transformation of the political paradigm in the direction of maturity is essential – but not necessarily likely. The close to "50-50" political division of the populace forces each party to scratch and claw for every possible vote. While the practical "majority" may swing to one side or the other over any relatively short span of time, the basic almost even divide remains present. This guarantees that neither party can afford to offend, alienate, or frighten any of the sizable percentage of the population who cannot see beyond their yearning for a return of a sense of omnipotence or Shared Omnipotence. While it may be politically unlikely, impractical or naïve to expect the political process to foster an implicit form of national psychotherapy, from a psychodynamic/developmental point of view, there is a dismal prognosis unless there can be some form of enlightened post-partisan leadership, which attracts the support of a percentage of the population significantly larger 50%, which would thus diminish the over-embellished power of the inherently immature, emotionally-based "swing voters".