

Fear and tradition drive followers to favour tyrants

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People who place high value on hierarchical structures, group loyalty, and conformity to traditions brought on by the perception that the world is a threatening place - are more likely to endorse tyrannical leadership traits, new research from NEOMA Business School (<https://neoma-bs.com>) reveals.

Assistant Professor Agata Mirowska and her co-authors, Dr. Raymond B. Chiu of Redeemer University and Dr. Rick D. Hackett of McMaster University, found that the worry of self-preservation in the face of perceived threats in the world is manifest through traditional morals, such as deference to authority and conformity to group and religious norms. This mix of fear and tradition can condition followers to see tyrannical leader traits as acceptable, even though others may be horrified by them. However, the effects of conforming to these traditional morals are greater for men than women, meaning that men with strong traditional views are most susceptible to the allure of tyranny.

A supportive and gentle leader may be seen as ideal for many, but the rise in populism and authoritarianism in politics has proven to be a disruptive and seemingly unstoppable force in the world today.

The findings suggest that understanding how people fall for the overbearing, brash, and self-aggrandizing traits of tyrants may help to avoid the damage that has come with their increasing power. Followers must make a conscious effort to avoid being deceived by the “toughness” of the tyrannical leader, especially since such leaders are typically men and the effects are greater for male followers.

“Our understanding of the moral mind shows that people don’t necessarily follow tyrannical or tough leaders because of some sort of personal or moral deficit. In fact, it’s quite the opposite,” says Dr. Mirowska.

“Support for tyrannical leaders may reflect well-intentioned efforts to achieve the best outcome in the context of a world that they perceive as dangerous.”

These findings come from two separate samples of adults, varying in age, education level, and employment status, who completed the moral foundations questionnaire. The study was published recently in the Journal of Business Ethics.

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For more information, a copy of the paper, or to speak to Dr. Mirowska, contact Luke Kerin at BlueSky Education on luke@bluesky-pr.com or call +44 (0)1582 790 706.