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Opening Editorial

Pandemics, human rights, and measures of presidential psychopathy



“We should be clear about what our results do not mean. They certainly do not imply that psychopathic individuals make especially effective presidents.”

Scott O. Lilienfeld (1960–2020)

The year 2020, the first year of full publication of *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law*, was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis caused additional constraints and hardships for humanity, not least for the stigmatized groups of incarcerated people with mental disorders and patients placed in forensic hospitals for court-mandated treatment. As editors, we have tried to respond quickly to this challenge and to help our international authors -and readers - see beyond their own “forensic noses” to obstacles and also to possible solutions that arise in and from the care of our “unique” patients. We were able to publish contributions from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the US, which dealt with very different aspects of care in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but which were ultimately all united by the idea of finding a necessary balance between “infection prevention, collective security and patient rights” (Gaudernack, D., & Dudeck, M. (2020).

In the first year, the Editorial Board succeeded in realizing one of the hopes associated with the launch of the journal, namely to make the scientific discourse more multilateral and interdisciplinary, and to give a voice to authors who might be overlooked elsewhere. We are therefore particularly pleased that we have been able to attract authors from over 15 different countries already in the first volume, who have given us an insight into regional psychiatric and psychotherapeutic care strategies for mentally ill offenders, discussed the organization of law enforcement and probation services at a regional level, and explored concepts of national and international law.

Matt DeLisi's paper for instance on “Fledgling psychopaths at midlife” built a study around Lynam's fledgling psychopathy hypothesis and led to a highly engaging and constructive discussion on the difficulties and overlaps in conceptualizing “psychopathy” (DeLisi, Drury, & Elbert, 2020; Eisenbarth, Heesterman, Raychaudhuri, & Shearer, 2020). This exchange once again demonstrated the importance of this (albeit still unfinished) concept for forensic psychiatry and psychology, as well as for criminology.

In particular, scientific research on successful psychopaths (“successful psychopathy [is] characterized by higher levels of autonomic responsivity and executive functioning, it may also be tied to elevated fearless dominance and conscientiousness (Smith, Ashley, & Sarah, 2015)), makes clear that it would be an inadmissible oversimplification to assume such personality traits only occur in prison settings or among “red collar criminals” (Perri, 2016). Given the prevalence of this personality trait, it is highly likely that one or another of us has already suffered or is suffering from the destructive characteristics of a “successful psychopath”, either directly in personal interactions, or indirectly

through socioeconomic policies or conditions at governmental and corporate levels (Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010; Coid, Yang, Ullrich, Roberts, & Hare, 2009).

Scott O. Lilienfeld, who sadly passed away far too early last year, was one of, if not the first, to systematically examine the presence of these personality facets among U.S. presidents with the help of historians. He found that “Fearless Dominance, which reflects the boldness associated with psychopathy, was correlated with better rated presidential performance, leadership, persuasiveness, crisis management, Congressional relations, and allied variables” (Lilienfeld et al., 2012).

The past four years, with the possible exception of the presidential bid of Barry M Goldwater in 1964, have led to very strong and almost unique vocal reactions from psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists about the personality traits of a U.S. president and related discussions of how and whether these affect the leadership of the country, perhaps even the world (Lee, 2019; Pouncey, 2018). On the one hand, there were those who declared APA Goldwater to be binding and could only countenance an “exception” to this regulation in view of certain circumstances such as providing guidance to government officials (if not shared with the public) or when addressing historical figures as part of psychobiographical studies (Appelbaum, 2017). On the other hand, there were those who made it their mission to sound the alarm in the media and some who even testified in front of US Congress (Sunlen & Ryan Nobles, 2018).

Four years later, and against the backdrop of the storm on the Capitol on January 6th of this year, both groups have to face some tough questions: Was it worth it for psychiatrists to violate the “Goldwater Rule” and to address Donald Trump's mental health and his personality traits or facets publicly? Did it make a difference? Did it even set a precedent for future elections? Assuming that it did not have a lasting effect in the U.S., will the consensus about Section 7.3 of the APA ethics code hold in the future? *FSI: Mind and Law* will try to stimulate discussions around these questions in the journal in an interdisciplinary way, and we invite the readership to contribute to this debate from their own perspective.

More generally, in 2021, after the success of our first volume and the scope of manuscripts we received, we have broadened out the categories formally called “Legislation and Jurisprudence” to “Law, Legislation, and Jurisprudence” and “Culture and Psychiatry” to “Culture and Theory” respectively. We also plan to widen the expertise within the Senior Editor team. Moreover, we will again focus on very different and interdisciplinary forensic topics, such as the mental state of refugees who have lost relatives in their flight to Europe, and we will seek to publish more qualitative work.

Finally, a focus that will also accompany us this year is our aim to investigate and describe forensic psychiatric care systems from different part of the worlds, remaining true to the motto of our journal: Combining international scientific exchange and local applicability.

We look forward to another successful year ahead.

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Declaration of competing interest

Michael Liebreuz is the Editor-in-Chief of Forensic Science International: Mind and Law. No other competing interests exist.

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