



MINI ARTICLE

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Does the tall poppy syndrome exist in America?

Douglas E. Garland*

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

The Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) is a metaphor denoting a poppy field wherein a Tall Poppy (TP) towers over the others and is cut down so that all poppies are similar in size [1]. Other countries have similar metaphors or proverbs: Japan has *deru kugi ha utareru* - "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down [2]," and both Holland's [3] and China's [4] proverb states "*tall trees catch much wind*." The metaphor intimates that TPS should exist in egalitarian societies as a mediocrity maintaining mechanism. In Anglosphere countries, Australia and New Zealand are very egalitarian and TPS has been part of their culture throughout the twentieth century and beyond. The Nordic countries are also candidates although their high taxation rates and the Law of Jante also serve as mediocrity maintaining mechanisms [5].

America's constitution and culture support the individual which includes rewarding achievement and TPS seems relatively uncommon or unrecognized by their populace. The Australian TP and the cutters' motives underwent varying interpretations during the last century [6]. The TP was originally defined as a conspicuously successful person who attracted envious attention. Later, the good TP gained recognition through distinction, rank or wealth but did not necessarily attract envious (bad envy) attention. A recognized TP could become conspicuous through egregious activities (bad TP) changing the cutter's motivation from bad envy to deservingness [7].

These newer definitions permitted more consistent studies. The classic good TP was cut down by a person with low esteem and bad envy so that the former TP was now on a lower rung, relatively elevating the cutter. The egregious TP was cut down by justification or deservingness by a good cutter without eliciting dark emotions. The cutter's goal was not self-elevation but bringing the person down to the level they deserved. The flawed person in the TPS could be the detractor or the victim. In reality, no one finds out or has interest in the low self-esteem, envious cutter of the TP unless the cutter is also a TP. It is the egregious, successful TP that generates people's attention. When the egregious TP is cut down, spectators experience schadenfreude which also sells newspapers.

Business, politicians, athletes and entertainment fields are prone to TPS while intellectuals, professionals and artists are less likely victims. But, the confusing idea that the tall popping of only tall poppies persisted in Australia. Mouly et al. [8] greatly added to the literature by expanding the concept of TPS. They described four levels of manifestations of TPS.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received August 10, 2020

Accepted August 24, 2020

Published August 31, 2020

KEYWORDS

Tall poppy syndrome; society; cultural phenomenon; cutting down; modesty

TPS was classified into two dimensions: the level of the TP (individual/organization) and the level of the detractor (peer/societal). The individuals were cut down by peers or society; individuals could be cut down by organizations or cut organizations down. The categorization freed us from the concept of the tall popping of the tall poppies. The metaphor, like many of the provoking emotions, is far more complex than its psychosocial evolution. A person does not have to be tall to be cut down which destroys the thrust of the metaphor - Mouly's peer to peer. The dark emotions, especially envy, and deservingness remain essential motivators in cutters. The opportunity of TPS occurs most commonly within peers - friends, neighbourhood, school, or work - short, tall, or average height. Work, especially in American meritocracy, involves hierarchy and competition, incubators for TPS. The comparison emotion envy senses that another's success, quality, or possession and happiness and may stimulate emulation which elevates the envier (good envy); but, if the person senses they cannot achieve a higher gain or happiness, cutting down the opponent becomes a more viable option (bad envy).

This peer to peer TPS seems to be in full bloom in America as well as other countries but is often unrecognized by society. Peer to peer TPS allows all walks of life to participate in TPS, especially TPs versus TPs in similar professions. Areas that were excluded in Australia such as the professions, arts, and scientists are fair game and, I suggest, commonplace. Companies may take on TPs or other companies. Organizations which includes any groups such as movements may act as cutters and also spew collateral damage. The government, its agencies and various personnel are, perhaps, the biggest cutters in any given country but have avoided scrutiny even in countries that acknowledge TPS. If the broadened definition of TPS is accepted, TPS may be readily identified in most countries beginning in antiquity.

Contact Douglas E. Garland ✉ dougarland@msn.com 📍 University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA, Tel: 1-562-606-9174

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Socrates' condemnation and drinking the hemlock was an act of TPS. So too was the charge of Aristotle's impiety. Alexander the Great's father Phillip II was assassinated (tall popped) as, perhaps, was Alexander himself. The First Emperor of China and Genghis Khan were purveyors of TPS as were royal crowns. Most dictatorships and the "isms" such as communism are practitioners. America, with the broadened definition, may be teeming with TPS.

Australia's tall popping of tall poppies is evident in American politics, sports, business, media-entertainment, and especially Hollywood. America possesses an abundance of other opportunities for TPS. Consumerism offers potential targets for peer to peer TPS in neighbourhoods, schools, friends, and social media. Meritocracy creates competition in the workplace as one climbs the ladder of success in the quest for the American Dream. This same competition exists in professions, arts and sciences as a means to differentiate one TP from another [9,10].

Even individual rights and equality have become problematic. These rights seem to be on a collision course with each other because of identity politics. The government's reach is so intertwined into daily life that it is difficult to prevent its grasp. Politics, with its peer to peer, party to party, and any part of the government weaponized against the opposing party or people, positions the government for a prominent role in TPS. Schadenfreude - joy from someone else's pain or misfortune and often involves bad envy - has limited recognition in America but not in psychosocial studies. Dr. Richard H. Smith, as well as others, has written an entire book "The Joy of Pain" on the subject [11]. Many of his case studies of schadenfreude were preceded by or resulted from TPS. Investigations into TPS in America seem warranted. Understanding the TPS metaphor and behaviour of the participants potentially aides in their behaviour modification.

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