

THE TALL POPPY SYNDROME

SCHADENFREUDE, RESENTMENT,
ANGER, & ENVY



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Chapter 1 - Preview

Chapter 1 - The Tall Poppy Syndrome

“We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

—Anaïs Nin, essayistⁱ

For the English-speaking world, reviewing research from Australia and New Zealand, where the **Tall Poppy Syndrome** is a national pastime, is crucial to understanding the metaphor. Two researchers stand out: Bert Peeters, PhD, has published adequately about TPS in the area of linguistics. Norman Feather, PhD, has published extensively within experimental social psychology (the study of human social behavior that includes moral behavior).

Linguistics

Tall Poppy (TP) is an expression describing “a person who is conspicuously successful; frequently one whose distinction, rank or wealth attracts envious notice or hostility.”ⁱⁱⁱ Three important components are distinction, conspicuousness, and envy. This definition gave rise to the negative labeling of TPs in Australia.

The Penguin Book of Australian Slang states a TP is “a very important person; an influential person; a person with status—often held in contempt by others, who try to bring about this person’s downfall or ruin.”ⁱⁱⁱ This definition omits conspicuousness from TPS and changes hostility and envy to contempt. Here, a TP is an important person with some negative connotations.

The *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (1997) defines TPS as “the habit of denigrating or ‘cutting down’ those who are successful, high achievers, etc.”^{iv} This definition describes the successful TP without negative connotations toward the TP or the cutter.

The wording of these definitions has contributed to persistent confusion in Australia and will be problematic in the United States as TPS becomes more recognized. Notice the use of negative words such as *conspicuously*, *envious*, *hostility*, *contempt*, *downfall*, *ruin*, and *denigrating*. One could assume that TPS, TPs, and cutters themselves are never good. As clarified in the introduction, however, good and bad forms of each exist, and TPs are not necessarily well known. A look at the understanding of TPS through the years reveals that the definitions have not kept up with evolving connotations.

In Australia, TPs were once generally seen as successful males, usually business leaders, who became rich and famous but were then the targets of criticism due to gratuitous narcissism. In other words, they were considered egotistical braggarts and remain so to many Australians. At the same time, Americans have long recognized braggarts and attribute the following phrase to Davy Crockett (regarding Andrew Jackson): “But I liked him well once: but when a man gets too big for his breeches, I say goodbye.”^v

As times changed, the conception shifted to include women, even though they are typically less likely to show off, bloat, or gloat. Women’s movements happened, glass ceilings broke, political correctness arrived, and to some extent, the characterization of TPs arrived at including more females and allowing that cutter envy may be good at times.

Some, including the Australian government and Norman Feather, PhD, want to celebrate achievement and encourage entrepreneurship by fostering TPs who could be leaders that inspire future generations to follow their footsteps. Susan Mitchell wrote a number of books describing and interviewing Australian female TPs. America has many examples of both genders whose lives and successes we admire and write books about.

The proper verb to deal with TPs has also gone through changes. *Lop off* was applied at one time, perhaps appropriately since heads were literally lopped off of some individuals in past centuries. In modern times, the connotation required modification, and other verbs have been used for completely

eliminating TPs: *pull out, prune, fell, topple, tear down, mow down, and chop down*. Severing is still part of the verb, but not the head. *Cut down to size*, especially the shortened *cut down*, is a popular verb used today.

Scientific Studies

An expert on TPS, Dr. Feather has written extensively on the subject. He was instrumental in designating the TP as a good person.

Feather developed a tall-poppy scale of half-positive and half-negative attitudes, which he used for many of his studies.^{vi} His list can also make us aware of our own attitudes. People may possess some of these traits but be unaware of them until they see them in black and white. Feather tested for the following attitudes:

- People who are very successful deserve all the rewards they get for their achievements.
- It's good to see very successful people fail occasionally.
- Very successful people often get too big for their boots.
- People who are very successful in what they do are usually friendly and helpful to others.
- With school, it's probably better for students to rank near the middle of the class than be the very top student.
- People shouldn't criticize or knock the very successful.
- Very successful people who fall from the top usually deserve their fall from grace.
- Those who are very successful ought to come down off their pedestals and be like other people.
- A very successful person should receive public recognition for his/her accomplishments.
- People who are tall poppies should be cut down to size.
- One should always respect the person at the top.

- One ought to be sympathetic to very successful people when they experience failure or fall from their high positions.
- Very successful people sometimes need to be brought back a peg or two, even when they have done nothing wrong.
- Society needs high achievers.
- People who always do a lot better than others need to learn what it's like to fail.
- People who are right at the top usually deserve their high positions.
- It's very common for society to support and encourage people who are very successful.
- People who are very successful get too full of their own importance.
- Very successful people usually succeed at the expense of other people.
- Very successful people who are at the top of their fields are usually fun to be with.

In 1989 Feather studied students' attitudes because the way people (cutters) relate to high achievers and their falls depends on the judges' own beliefs. He also studied "deservingness," a personal judgment-justice mechanism related to the perceived responsibility of a person for an outcome. He found that people with negative attitudes toward TPs were more likely to have low self-esteem and were more supportive after a fall. Students were more punitive when a high achiever cheated compared to an average person, and students felt more pleasure when a high achiever fell than when an average person fell.

Then, in 1991 he studied reactions to people who have fallen in public life (sports, politics, entertainment). Study participants were more pleased with TPs who earned their statuses by internal rather than external causes and those who were judged favorably as people. The students were more disturbed when these TPs fell than the TPs with less favorable characteristics. The study group was more forgiving when TPs fell through no fault of their own or by external causes.

In another study (1992), he asked students to evaluate high-performing achievers and average achievers on test scores. Students felt empathy if a high achiever had a poor outcome due to illness but not laziness. The study demonstrated that perceived deservingness for achievement outcomes was related to attributions of responsibility.

His 1993 study of political leaders demonstrated that success was more likely to be deserved if the leader's behavior was competent and characterized by integrity and lack of arrogance. Political success was undeserved if the leader behaved in the opposite manner. People often apply similar criteria regarding the US political arena.

Feather's international study in 1993 involved self-esteem and attitudes of high achievers in Australian versus Japanese university students. Japanese students felt the high achiever could not deviate from the collective and that one must be self-deprecating as opposed to the more self-determined individuals in Western societies. The study groups exhibited contrasting independence and interdependence, with the Australians being more independent.

A 2006 non-Feather study performed in the United States evaluated the responses of Americans and Australians to those who were born rich or poor and ended rich or poor. Respondents in both countries regarded poor-to-rich people as competent and likable compared to those who went from rich to poor. The differences were greater in the American context than the Australian. Someone born rich was interpreted by Americans as fair and legitimate in an economic system, but the Australians perceived that system as less fair and legitimate.

Finally, Mouly and Sabjarab evaluated New Zealand's manifestation of TPS (2000). V.S. Mouly and H Sabjarab. *Transcending Boundaries: Integrating People, Processes and Systems*. "The tall poppy syndrome in New Zealand: An exploratory investigation." (2000), pp.285-289. This paper categorized TPs as individuals or organizations and cutters as individuals or societies.^{vii} This scheme is valuable and has many applications for the American experience. They categorized TPS as follows:

- Type I (A)—Direct: a peer-to-peer attack.
- Type I (B)—Indirect: detractors are not direct peers; for example, parents of a gifted child may be tall popped by other parents, not other children.
- Type II—Individual versus society: denigration of a high achiever, such as an executive who draws an excessive salary, as viewed by society.
- Type III—Organization versus peer: other companies may try to discredit tall-poppy companies.
- Type IV—Organization versus society: society against a company’s profits or product. Organizational TPS can include movements, which are often responsible for TPS in the United States.
- Type V - Government versus everyone and everything: government leadership, its agencies, or individuals within the deep state discrediting (cutting) individuals, groups, products, companies, even entire industries. As one type of organization, governments have been guilty of TPS, both literally and figuratively, for centuries and are one of the largest groups of cutters. The government has its own category to emphasize its role because it should be the protector not the taker of our rights as a purveyor of TPS, unless that is deserved, of course.

Dr. Feather summarized twenty years of his work in his article “Tall Poppies, Deservingness and Schadenfreude,” including the information from the above studies. His work surpasses the simple envy-of-the-TP model.

The most common variable in his work was deservingness. A positive outcome that follows a positive action is deserved and balanced, but a positive outcome that follows a negative action—such as a high mark after cheating—is unbalanced.

He also labeled some cutters as “favor-fall” types. These people have lower self-esteems and are lower in power and achievement values, so they judge TPs as more deserving of the fall. More left in

political orientation, they value equality highly. Favor-fall types take pleasure after the fall (schadenfreude).

Outcomes determine various emotions linked to deservingness—pleasure, pride, anger, resentment, guilt, and regret.

Tall Poppy Syndrome

Syndrome means a variety of signs and symptoms that correlate with each other to define a specific disease. The concept was developed by Ibn Sina (AD 980–1037) and refined in the seventeenth century by Thomas Sydenham.

Medically speaking, a syndrome connotes a complex condition consisting of a combination of physical evidence and complaints along with some type of confirming lab work. The complete gamut of signs and symptoms is rarely exhibited in a disease entity, but when they are, the disease is categorized as classic.

Psychologists adopted the word syndrome in the fifties, leading to more widespread use of the term. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* states that a syndrome is “employed with reference not only to a complex of symptoms that, collectively, bear the presence of a disease, a psychological disorder, or indeed any undesirable or abnormal condition but [also refers] to any kind of distinctive behavioral pattern.”^{viii} TPS fits this definition. Although TPS has been called a virus, it is not caught by contact or confirmed by lab work.

Sine qua non is when some symptoms of a condition are present but not those specifically needed to confirm the diagnosis. When signs and symptoms are merely similar to a disease but not enough to confirm a diagnosis, the entity is labeled *forme fruste*. The latter allows a practitioner some latitude to be inclusive but not specific. As TPS becomes more recognized in the United States, variations of its

components will lead to under- and overdiagnosis. Although the scientific community has refined the definition, the public sometimes incorrectly claims victimization of TPS.

The sine qua non of TPS requires three components: (1) a high achiever, usually justified, (2) a cutter of various emotions, and (3) the fall. That is the textbook, medical school, and research definition. Real-life experiences that people commonly encounter may be quite simple, however, and not even require a TP but a member of one's tribe.

Suppose a new position is posted in your workplace. An envious person begins a cut-down campaign to denigrate a more qualified competitor to prevent the other person from securing the position. The envious person cannot raise his own ability, so he attempts to cut down the other. This is the mediocrity-maintaining mechanism at its worst and what most people will witness. This everyday variety of TPS does not make the news, where instances are more high profile and follow the textbook definition.

Adjusting classical TPS to an egregious TP, we would find (1) a high-profile person; (2) the TP's development of deficiencies in full view, such as overzealous self-importance, grandstanding, ego trips, boasting, or other obnoxious behavior; (3) cutter(s) with highly charged emotions; and (4) a significant fall to mediocrity or less.

Sometimes people attempt to cut someone down, but the TP survives the cutting. Although the TPS complex is incomplete, the TP is still a victim.

Other signs or symptoms could be added. If the fall is far enough, the cutter can experience *schadenfreude*, which some consider frosting on the cheerful cake. TPS does not require *schadenfreude* to complete the syndrome, and it may occur independently from TPS as well.

Case Study: Lleyton Hewitt

Lleyton Hewitt is an Australian tennis player who won the US Open in 2001 and Wimbledon in 2002 and is the sole holder of several Australian Davis Cup records. With over six hundred wins, he is on the Association of Tennis Professionals list of all-time number-one singles players. He drew detractors immediately because of his many conspicuous behaviors: the backward-tilting hat, outbursts on the court, calling out a linesperson or umpire, pumping himself up after each scored point. And he was a tax dodger. He has never gained the respect that he feels warranted and has been a recurring victim of TPS.^{ix}

Conclusion

This chapter provides an extended definition of TPS to round out your understanding, perhaps more information than required to recognize it. Medical school was like that—jammed with the study of diseases, germ theory, and research. When I finally began practice, the office was full of runny noses, respiratory infections, influenza, and ankle sprains instead. Although TPS might occur in any number of ways, you will most likely encounter envy-triggered TPS in your neighborhood, child’s school, or office. Do not waste your time looking for zebras unless you are on the Serengeti. Once you understand the basic entity, the more complex will open, just as the syndrome in full bloom.

Notes

ⁱ “Anaïs Nin Quotes,” Goodreads, accessed February 25, 2020,

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/5030-we-don-t-see-things-as-they-are-we-see-them>

ⁱⁱ *Australian National Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (2016), s.v. “tall poppy.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Lenie Johansen, *The Penguin Book of Australian Slang: A Dinkum Guide to Oz English* (London: Penguin, 1996)

^{iv} *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 3rd ed. (1997), s.v. “Tall Poppy Syndrome.”

^v <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/too-big-for-your-breeches.html>

^{vi} This and the following references to Feather's studies are all from Norman T. Feather, "Tall Poppies, Deservingness and Schadenfreude," *The Psychologist* 25 (June 2012): 434-437, <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-25/edition-6/tall-poppies-deservingness-and-schadenfreude>.

^{vii} V.S. Mouly and H Sabjarab. *Transcending Boundaries: Integrating People, Processes and Systems*. "The tall poppy syndrome in New Zealand: An exploratory investigation." (2000), pp.285-289.

^{viii} *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "syndrome."

^{ix} Wikipedia, s.v. "Lleyton Hewitt," last modified February 20, 2020, 5:09, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lleyton_Hewitt.