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Psychological Insights into Homegrown Jihadists

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Abstract

This article examines eight homegrown jihadists in light of my psychological typology of school shooters. The terrorists are discussed within the three categories of the typology: psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized. Though terrorists have often been viewed as ordinary people with no significant psychological issues, the cases presented here indicate a greater degree of psychological disturbance than has often been recognized.

Keywords: terrorists, homegrown violent extremists, domestic terrorists, jihadis, jihadists, psychology, psychological typology

Introduction

A common view of terrorists is that they are psychologically normal people who simply become devoted to a cause. According to Silber and Bhatt, “individuals undergoing radicalization appear as ‘ordinary’ citizens, who look, act, talk, and walk like everyone around them” (2007, p. 85). Similarly, Bergen commented that American jihadists “are, on average, as well educated and emotionally stable as the typical citizen. They are ordinary Americans” (2017, p. 15).

According to this view, these ordinary people experience a life crisis. The crisis could consist of one or more stresses relating to marriage, career, finances, death of a loved one, or other significant life issues. The life crisis creates a “cognitive opening” that makes ordinary people vulnerable to radicalization. From this perspective, their terrorist activities have nothing to do with being psychologically disturbed, but rather are a way of meeting other needs, such as finding a group to belong to, a belief system to anchor them, and a meaning in their lives.

The importance of meaning has been highlighted by researchers who focus on “the quest for personal significance” as a primary factor for terrorists (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek, 2009). Similarly, Bergen has described violent extremists as “zeros trying to be heroes... losers who attached themselves to extremist right-wing ideologies that gave meaning to their otherwise dead-end lives” (2018).

Most people, however, no matter how devastating the crises in their lives, or how insignificant they feel, do not become mass murderers. This raises the question: what other factors might be involved that contribute to people’s decisions to commit acts of violence? Might terrorists be more psychologically disturbed than has generally been recognized?

In fact, a more sophisticated understanding has been evolving, based on the recognition of the wide array of people involved in terrorist activities. For example, there may be differences between those who write propaganda, give speeches, or raise funds for a terrorist group versus those who commit the actual attacks. Also, there may be differences between those who commit attacks but expect to survive versus those who carry out suicide attacks.

Other differences include foreign versus domestic terrorists, and lone actors versus those who are group-affiliated. For example, based on their analysis of over 200 terrorists, Corner and Gill concluded that, “there is a stronger association between mental illness and lone-actor terrorists than mental illness and group-based terrorists” (2014, p. 30).

This article seeks to continue the exploration of psychological disturbances among homegrown terrorists.

Psychological Typology

Based on research into school shooters, I developed a typology of perpetrators: psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized (Langman, 2009, 2015). These categories are not mutually exclusive; perpetrators can have traits of more than one of the types. Subsequent work found that this typology had relevance for other types of mass violence, including homegrown violent extremists who were white supremacists (Langman, in press). This article explores a sample of homegrown jihadists to see if this typology sheds light on their psychological dynamics.

The Sample

The current study presents eight homegrown jihadists, seven of whom carried out attacks and one who planned an attack but was stopped. The incidents occurred from 2009 through 2016. One was Canadian, with the rest being American. Though five of these perpetrators acted alone, there were two pairs among them; one pair consisted of two brothers, and the other was a husband and wife (though the wife in this case is not discussed in this article).

Psychopathic Perpetrators

Psychopathic killers are profoundly narcissistic, meeting their own needs at the expense of others. They have no use for law and morality, because these concepts put limits on what one is allowed to do. Psychopaths reject limits, feeling entitled to do whatever they want. They lack a conscience, as well as empathy for other people. They are not only callous and indifferent to the suffering they cause, but may also be sadistic, finding pleasure in causing others to suffer. If they transgress in any way, there is no guilt or remorse. Because of their entitlement, they are easily enraged when their desires are thwarted. Due to the combination of disregard for the law, lack of empathy, and explosive tempers, they often have a history of violent behavior. Psychopaths may also be thrill-seekers and risk-takers, people who are easily bored and engage in daredevil activities to entertain themselves.

Finally, some psychopaths are skilled at impression management, knowing how to hide their dark side and present well when they want to. They also have a blatant disregard for the truth, lying easily and frequently. In addition, they can be remarkably calm in situations that other people would find overwhelmingly stressful. This is particularly noteworthy in the immediate aftermath of an attack; when other perpetrators would be hyperventilating or sobbing, psychopathic killers are often nonchalant and even pleased with themselves (Langman, 2015).

Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev

Two brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, bombed the Boston Marathon in 2013. The Tsarnaev family consisted of a mother, father, two daughters, and the two brothers. They were an immigrant family from Kyrgyzstan struggling to get established in the United States. Though the family was nominally Muslim, they were not particularly observant. Tamerlan's dream was to be a member of the United States boxing team in the Olympics. This was not merely a pipedream — he twice was the Golden Glove heavyweight champion for New England.

Tsarnaev demonstrated a disregard for law and morality for years before the Boston Marathon bombing. He was a reckless or careless driver, who was pulled over at least nine times in four years. He was also a drug dealer. He did not simply engage in illegal behavior, but apparently took a serious interest in it. "He had long been fascinated by aliases and spy craft. An Amazon wish list in his name listed the books, *How to Make Driver's Licenses and Other ID on Your Home Computer* and *Document Fraud and Other Crimes of Deception* (McPhee, 2017, p. 233).

Tsarnaev was bad-tempered and violent, and given his training as a boxer, this made him dangerous. As a high school student, he punched a boy in the head, knocking him unconscious (Gessen, 2015). As a young adult, he had two girlfriends at the same time. When he hit one of the women, she called the police and he was charged with domestic violence (McPhee, 2017). The other girlfriend eventually became his wife. He was verbally and physically abusive to her and cheated on her repeatedly (McPhee, 2017). These events demonstrate his lack of morality, his callousness, and his sense of entitlement to unrestricted sexual pleasure.

Tsarnaev appears to have committed — with an accomplice — a triple murder. Though he was not charged for this, evidence that became available after the bombing clearly points toward him. Not only did he apparently kill three of his friends, including his best friend, but their throats were cut so severely that they were nearly beheaded. Also, one of the men had his genitals mutilated and another had his penis severed and placed on his face (McPhee, 2017). The gruesomeness of this attack suggests not only rage, but a sadistic desire to mutilate the victims.

Was there a life crisis that put Tsarnaev on the path of radicalization? There was actually a series of events that resulted in the family falling apart and going their separate ways. Tsarnaev's parents divorced, with both mother and father returning to Central Asia. His younger brother was away at college, and both sisters were divorced with children and living in New Jersey. Rather quickly,

Tsarnaev was left as the only one in the home that previously held his entire family.

Not only did the family scatter, but Tsarnaev's own life went downhill as well. He had given up on his dream of fame and fortune through boxing and had stopped training. After attending college briefly, he dropped out. He was married and had a young child, but while his wife worked up to 80 hours a week, he was unemployed. Despite his wife's efforts, the family received public assistance. Tsarnaev stayed home with his child, but was not happy about being a stay-at-home father (McPhee, 2017). As Bergen noted, "He was now a very long way from his conception of himself as a larger-than-life hero" (2017, p. 227).

At some point, Tsarnaev turned to radical Islam and wrote, "Now I live because I'm a warrior" (McPhee, 2017, p. 93). The failed boxer, college dropout, and unemployed stay-at-home father reinvented himself as a terrorist.

Tsarnaev's impression management was notable in the days after the bombing. Friends who saw him afterwards saw nothing out of the ordinary in his behavior — he acted perfectly normally. As he watched television coverage of the bombing, he smiled. There was no indication of anxiety about being caught. His sadistic delight in causing suffering was seen in his reaction to watching the coverage of a 78-year-old runner named Bill Iffrig being hit by the bomb blast: "There was something about that old man on the ground — Tamerlan loved it. When he saw the shot of Iffrig falling as the smoke rose in the background, Tamerlan laughed" (McPhee, 2017, p. 93).

Though less is known about Tsarnaev's younger brother, Dzhokhar (often simplified to Jahar), a few observations can be made. First, a distinction has been made between psychopaths who are more abrasive and belligerent, and those who are charming or charismatic (Langman, 2015). Using this distinction for the Tsarnaev brothers, it appears that Tamerlan was the abrasive type, as indicated by his long history of violence, and Dzhokhar was the charismatic type.

Dzhokhar's primary illegal activity took the form of drug dealing. While he was in college, he was selling up to \$1,000 a week. He also carried a concealed weapon with him due to the large amounts of drugs and cash he often had with him. Dzhokhar's drug dealing "helped pay for indulgences previously out of reach — his love of designer shoes, trips to pricey New York City clubs, and other extras like Ciroc vodka and psychedelic drugs" (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

One author described him as a “social superstar,” noting that, “Charm appears to be his sole distinguishing personality trait” (Gessen, 2015, p. 73). He was smooth and cool, and good at conning people. “He was the one friends relied on to sweet-talk campus police out of nailing them for drug use or other violations” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013). Such encounters happened “as often as twice a month over issues such as speeding, raucous partying, and possession of alcohol or drugs... Friends said Jahar [i.e., Dzhokhar] always knew how to fake penitence” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

Dzhokhar’s skill in conning people was evident when he was on the brink of losing his financial aid and being kicked out of college due to his consistently failing grades. He concocted a “sob story” about being overwhelmed by events in Chechnya: “This year I lost too many of my loved relatives. I was unable to cope with the stress and maintain my schoolwork” (McPhee, 2017, p. 150). There were no relatives lost in Chechnya — in fact, there were no relatives at all in Chechnya (Gessen, 2015), but the administration didn’t know this, and accepted his story, allowing him to stay in college and keep his financial aid. In fact, Dzhokhar lied chronically — about his grades, about being accepted to other universities, and about transferring to a better school (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

As a friend said, Dzhokhar “had no problem taking risks.” He not only was a fast driver, “but in college he took his recklessness to new limits. A lit cigarette in hand, Jahar loved to imitate the racecar drivers he so admired and accelerate his 1999 green Honda Civic to nearly 120 miles an hour... Another stunt both impressed and slightly terrified his friends: Jahar sometimes turned corners with the steering wheel between his knees, leaving his hands free to roll a joint” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

Though Dzhokhar does not appear to have had a long history of violence, during college he got into a fight; the victim ended up at a hospital (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

His psychopathic nonchalance and callousness in the wake of the bombing was striking. He went back to campus, worked out in the gym, “partied with his boys,” and seemed perfectly normal. He played video games and watched coverage of the bombing with his friends, and no one detected anything out of the ordinary. After he was captured, he sat in the courtroom as survivors and first responders told their stories: “During all of this heart-wrenching testimony, Dzhokhar showed no emotion... He doodled on a legal pad and stroked his beard and giggled with his attorneys. He couldn’t have cared less about the victims’ pain” (McPhee, 2017, p. 264).

Carlos Bledsoe/Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad

Carlos Bledsoe was an African American who was raised as a Baptist. In 2009, he shot two soldiers at an Army recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one. Bledsoe’s family had a prosperous business, and his parents hoped that he would get a business degree and eventually run the company.

Bledsoe, however, had an early history of misconduct, at least as far back as middle school, when he received repeated suspensions for fighting (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015). When he was approximately 14 or 15 years old, he began using marijuana and alcohol (Goetz, 2010). In high school, he had legal trouble as a result of fighting, property damage, and homicidal threats (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015).

Shortly after graduating from high school, his car was hit in a traffic accident. He got out of his vehicle, put on brass knuckles, and shattered a window in the other driver’s car. He also threatened to get the other driver’s address, track her down, and kill her. He was charged with unlawful possession of a weapon (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015).

He began college, but developed a more serious substance abuse problem. He also got into repeated fights (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015). Then he was pulled over and arrested for having a pound of marijuana. He also had two shotguns, a loaded SKS semi-automatic assault rifle, a switchblade, and his brass knuckles. He was given probation, but with the stipulation that any further violation of the law would result in his serving a 14-year sentence (Gartenstein-Ross, 2013).

This seemed to be the turning point in his life that spurred him to engage in a religious quest. Feeling dissatisfied with Christianity, he explored Judaism, attending services at a synagogue, but not feeling at home there. He then developed an interest in Islam. He eventually converted and changed his name to Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad. His conversion created conflict with his family, and he distanced himself from them (Bergen, 2017). Muhammad started college, but then quit. He had trouble holding a job. He went to Yemen, where he married a Muslim woman, but the marriage did not last long. Muhammad returned to the United States alone (Gartenstein-Ross, 2013). He was unable to pay his rent, resulting in legal proceedings against him (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015).

He became preoccupied with violence against Jews and the American military (Bergen, 2017). He wanted to kill rabbis, so he fired shots at the home of one rabbi; no one was hurt in this

attack. He then planned an attack at a Jewish community center but aborted his plan due to the presence of children. He ended up shooting two soldiers outside a recruiting station, killing one of them. Afterwards, he was unrepentant, callous, sadistic, and violent in prison. He cut one inmate with a shank, stabbed a guard, assaulted another guard, threatened people, and vandalized the cells he was in. He was reportedly one of the most problematic inmates in the prison's history.

One noteworthy aspect of his history is that at one point, he was considering becoming a Jew, and then after converting to Islam, he decided that Jews deserved to die. This indicates a profoundly unstable identity.

Omar Mateen

Omar Mateen committed the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida, in 2016. Though it is not clear that Mateen had been radicalized or that his attack was really an act of jihad, he made claims to this effect, and thus he is included in this sample.

Mateen grew up Muslim, but his family was not strictly observant. Mateen's history of problematic behavior goes back to elementary school. Early school reports noted that he was "verbally abusive, rude, aggressive" (Barry, Kovaleski, Blinder, and Mashal, 2016), and that he demonstrated a "lack of remorse" (Luibrand, 2016). His misconduct resulted in his being disciplined 31 times from ages six to 13 (Paletta, Berzon, and Emshwiller, 2016). In third grade, he engaged in "much talk about violence" (Luibrand, 2016). In fifth grade, he fantasized about committing a campus shooting and threatened to bring gun to school (Marcius and Dillon, 2016). His behavior became worse, including "spitting in teachers faces" (Marcius and Dillon, 2016). As one educator noted, "he was a mean, troubled child. Scary" (Paletta, Berzon, and Emshwiller, 2016).

Mateen's behavior problems continued in secondary school, resulting in his being suspended 15 times for a total of 48 days from 1999 through 2001 (Paletta, Berzon, and Emshwiller, 2016). At some point during high school, he was arrested for fighting, causing him to be placed in an alternative school (Swisher, 2016). He was so aggressive that his mother and sisters were afraid of him (Marcius and Dillon, 2016).

Mateen smoked marijuana and drank alcohol, sometimes to the point of blacking out. He also worked out and used large amounts of steroids to bulk up his muscles (Luibrand, 2016). As an employee, "he was just agitated about everything. Always shaken. Always agitated. Always mad" according to one co-worker (Barry, Kovaleski, Blinder, and Mashal, 2016). He wasn't just agitated and angry, but

"he talked about killing people all the time" as well (Blinder, Healy, and Oppel, 2016).

When he met the woman who would become his first wife, she found him to be funny and nice (Barry, Kovaleski, Blinder, and Mashal, 2016), as well as charming (Blinder, Healy, and Oppel, 2016). After they married, however, he isolated her from her family and physically abused her repeatedly; she reported him to the police and divorced him (Perez, Prokupecz, and Yan, 2016). He then married another woman and abused her, too (Luibrand, 2016).

Despite his misconduct, "repeatedly, he wiggled out of trouble, distracting officials with a beguiling charm, a feigned stupidity, or some other tactic" (Paletta, Berzon, and Emshwiller, 2016). This ability is consistent with a psychopathic personality.

Mateen's career goal was to become a police officer, but he failed repeatedly in his efforts to achieve this. In 2007, he was dismissed from a training program in corrections. In 2011, he tried to become state trooper, but failed. In 2015, he was rejected by a law enforcement academy (Swisher, 2016), perhaps because he had disclosed on his application that he had committed "undetected crimes." Though he got work as a security guard, this was not what he wanted. His identity was so wrapped up in being an officer that he wore patches for the New York Police Department. He also may have wanted to be a soldier — his car had a U.S. Marines license plate (Swisher, 2016).

As expressed in an article, "the bodybuilder who had once imagined a respected future in law enforcement was working the guard's booth at the entrance to... a golf resort community" (Barry, Kovaleski, Blinder, and Mashal, 2016). It was a big drop from his dream. After the attack, his father "said his son may have pledged allegiance to ISIS because 'he wanted to boost himself'" (Perez, Prokupecz, and Yan, 2016).

After the attack, Mateen talked to law enforcement officers over the telephone and showed no sign of distress. In fact, in the wake of committing one of the worst mass attacks in United States history, Mateen was "cool and calm" (Alvarez, Perez-Pena, and Hauser, 2016).

Psychotic Perpetrators

The psychotic category includes perpetrators who fall within the domain of either schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder. Those who are schizophrenic have symptoms such as hallucinations and/or delusions. Those who are schizotypal may not have full-blown psychosis, but may experience paranoid thinking and have difficulty distinguishing what is real from what is not. People with

schizophrenic and schizotypal symptoms may strike others as odd in their behavior, exhibiting signs of either flattened or inappropriate affect, or engaging in behavior that is notably inappropriate for the situation. Their speech may be incoherent at times, saying things that don't make sense. People in both categories typically struggle socially, having few or no friends, and often fail in the domains of love, sex, and marriage.

Ayanle Hassan Ali

Ali was a Muslim who lived in Canada. He committed a knife attack at a military recruiting center in Toronto in 2016.

Ali's mother was schizophrenic with prominent paranoid symptoms. At times, she accused him of poisoning her, but at other times, she worried for his safety, thinking that he was in danger (Canadian Press, 2019). His parents separated in 2003, when he was 14 years old. This is when his own psychotic symptoms reportedly began. He had auditory hallucinations, ideas of reference (thinking that external events referred to him), paranoid delusions, and believed he was possessed.

He heard voices sending him messages, suggestions. The TV spoke to him. The radio spoke to him. Government agencies were monitoring his thoughts. He believed himself possessed by jinns, malevolent spirits (DiManno, 2018).

Perhaps as a result of his psychosis, Ali withdrew "from all normal social involvement" (DiManno, 2018). He was 27 years old and not only was not married, but had no apparent history of dating or relationships. He had few friends, does not appear to have had a job for seven years, and reportedly only left home to attend mosque or buy groceries (Khandaker, 2016). The combination of psychotic symptoms and severe isolation is comparable to that seen in other psychotic killers, such as Seung Hui Cho (Langman, 2009) and Adam Lanza (Langman, 2015).

Nidal Hasan

Hasan committed a shooting at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009. Hasan grew up in a mainstream Muslim community in the United States. Though details are lacking on his youth, Bergen noted that, "Nidal passed through high school like a ghost, making few friends or lasting impressions" (2017, pp. 69–70). He apparently never had a girlfriend, and may have never had a date. As an adult, he talked about wanting to marry and made efforts to find a wife, but at age 39, he was still single.

He was more successful with his career, becoming a psychiatrist and major in the Army. He did not function well, however, and was described as follows: "Chronic poor performer... Placed

on probation and remediation... Often failed to meet basic job expectations... Barely competent" (U.S. Senate Committee, 2011, p. 33). As a result of his deficiencies, he required counseling and extra supervision.

Unlike with Ayanle Hassan Ali, no evidence has come to light that Hasan had hallucinations or delusions. Thus, he does not appear to have been schizophrenic. Various reports of his demeanor and behavior, however, suggest possible schizotypal traits. Due to the unavailability of more detailed information, this conceptualization remains speculative.

For example, Hasan was described by colleagues and students as "disconnected, aloof, paranoid, belligerent, and schizoid" (Zwerdling, 2009). The use of the term schizoid is noteworthy, because schizoid and schizotypal personalities have overlapping traits. The core definition of schizoid personality disorder is "a pervasive pattern of detachment from social relationships and a restricted range of expression of emotions in interpersonal settings" (DSM-V, 2013, p. 652). Hasan's social detachment and restricted range of emotions also is in keeping with schizotypal diagnostic criteria. As noted above, multiple people viewed him as paranoid. Unfortunately, the basis for this is not known. Paranoia, however, is a schizotypal symptom.

He also engaged in odd behavior, particularly considering that he worked on a military base. He gave presentations to his colleagues and wrote reports in which he defended Osama bin Laden and justified suicide bombings. He seemed completely oblivious to how blatantly inappropriate his behavior was. This may have been an example of what Millon refers to as schizotypals' "fundamental lack of social comprehension" (1996, p. 625).

In addition, Hasan alienated people by talking about unbelievers being condemned to hell, and that they would be (or should be) set on fire, beheaded, and have burning oil poured down their throats (Morning Edition, 2009). These are bizarre ideas, and could represent schizotypals' "odd beliefs... [and] bizarre fantasies or preoccupations" (DSM-V, p. 655).

Hasan apparently had a life crisis with the deaths of his parents at relatively young ages, spurring him to become more religious. This crisis was exacerbated by his impending deployment. The idea of going to a war zone, where the United States would be fighting Muslims, was overwhelming to him. He talked with a religious leader at his local mosque, who tried to assure him that there was no religious reason not to serve in his capacity within the Army. During the last conversation with the leader at the mosque, Hasan "seemed almost incoherent" (Bergen, 2017, p.

79). Though this is vague, incoherence could have been a sign of his deteriorating mental state, possibly providing more evidence that he was becoming psychotic. In fact, “the officials who supervised him sat around wondering, could Nidal Hasan be psychotic?” (All Things Considered, 2009). If his superiors were also psychiatrists, then their observations would carry significant weight.

Hasan had business cards made that did not mention his military position, but included the notation “SoA,” which stood for Soldier of Allah. This became his new identity. As summarized by Hasan’s first cousin and perhaps the closest person in his life: “Nidal had nothing to live for: no wife, no children, no parents, no friends, and a deployment he dreaded into a war against other Muslims. ‘He went postal. And he called it Islam’” (Bergen, 2017, p. 84).

The combination of bizarre social behavior, strange ideas, aloofness, lack of friends, paranoia, and possible incoherence suggests that he may have had schizotypal personality disorder. Though schizotypals are not typically violent:

When external pressures may be especially acute, they may react with a massive and psychotic outpouring of primitive impulses... Many schizotypals have stored up intense repressed anxieties and hostilities throughout their lives. Once released, these feelings burst out in a rampaging flood (Millon, 1996, p. 627).

This could account for why Hasan — who had no history of violent behavior — felt driven to commit mass murder.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev

Though Tsarnaev was discussed above as psychopathic, there is also evidence that he was psychotic, including auditory hallucinations and concerns about his identity. Regarding his hallucinations, he reportedly “started hearing the voice as a young man.” This was frightening to him. “It came to him at unexpected times, an internal rambling that he alone could hear. Alarmed, he confided to his mother that the voice ‘felt like two people inside of me’” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

Tsarnaev told a friend “that the voice had begun to issue orders and to require him to perform certain acts, though he never told his friend specifically what those acts were” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013). The friend said of Tsarnaev:

He believed in majestic mind control, which is a way of breaking down a person and creating an alternative personality with which they must coexist. You can give a signal, a phrase or a gesture, and bring out the alternate personality

and make them do things. [He] thought someone might have done that to him (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013).

It was reported that, “He said, ‘Someone is in my brain, telling me stuff to do. He said he was trying to ignore it but it was hard to do. Whatever he was being told to do, he didn’t want to do it’” (Jacobs, Filipov, and Wren, 2013). Relatives of Tsarnaev speculated that he was schizophrenic. Based on the reports of his psychotic symptoms, this appears to be accurate. He apparently had a psychopathic personality, but in early adulthood experienced the onset of schizophrenia. How much the bombing was a result of the voice in his head is impossible to know, but the references to command hallucinations telling him to do something he did not want to do raise the possibility that his psychosis may have been a significant factor in his attack.

Traumatized Perpetrators

Whereas psychopathic and psychotic perpetrators typically come from stable, more or less functional families, traumatized perpetrators grow up in families that are chronically and severely dysfunctional. The homes are notable for parental substance abuse, domestic violence, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sometimes sexual abuse. The children grow up amid chaos and unpredictability, enduring high levels of stress.

Colleen LaRose

Colleen LaRose became known as Jihad Jane. She had communicated with jihadists online and planned to kill a Swedish artist, but was arrested before she could do so.

LaRose grew up in horrendous circumstances. Both parents were alcoholic; they divorced when she was three years old. Her father raped her repeatedly from the age of eight through 13. At 13, LaRose ran away and survived through prostitution. What traumas she may have endured as a child prostitute remain unknown. What has been reported is that she contracted a sexually transmitted disease, and also became pregnant and had a miscarriage. The miscarriage reportedly left her unable to have children. At the age of 16, she found her way to a shelter. A worker at the shelter listened to her story, and then called LaRose’s father; he matter-of-factly said, “Yeah, I raped her” (Shiffman, 2012).

At age 16 she married a 32-year-old man, but he was abusive, so she divorced him. At age 24, she married again, but this husband was also abusive, and she again ended the marriage. Her brother and father died in close proximity, and this may have precipitated a crisis for her. At some point, she attempted suicide (Simon, 2016). During her life, she abused alcohol and

a variety of drugs, including cocaine, crystal meth, and heroin (Shiffman, 2012).

In addition to her history of trauma, it is important to consider her genetic inheritance. The significance of a genetic predisposition toward violence is highlighted in *The Anatomy of Violence: The Biological Roots of Crime* (Raine, 2013). Though genetics are only one potential factor in violence, Raine documents how prominent they can be in regard to violence from one generation to the next. LaRose's father was an immoral, callous, and perhaps sadistic man who apparently felt no compunction in raping his own daughter. This lack of empathy is profound. Not only was LaRose a victim of trauma, but half of her genetic inheritance came from her father, perhaps predisposing her to callousness. If she had a functional father and had been raped by a stranger, there would have been trauma, but she would have not carried the potentially damaging genes from her father.

Syed Rizwan Farook

Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife carried out the attack in San Bernardino. Despite having a six-month-old daughter, the couple chose to commit mass murder and suicide.

Farook grew up with an alcoholic father who was chronically unstable and frequently violent. He was verbally and physically abusive to his wife and children. Farook's mother said of her husband, "He is always mad. Drinking all day. Screaming on me, shouting at my kids for no reason" (Kim, 2015). The father reportedly beat his wife, choked her, threw dishes at her, dropped a television on her, and pushed her toward an oncoming car (Parvini, Hamilton, and Knoll, 2015).

The father also had an unstable work history. He filed for bankruptcy in 2002. Not only was the father violent, but it was reported that he also "threatens to kill himself on a daily basis" (Kim, 2015). At least once, he was hospitalized due to his risk of suicide. The marriage was on the rocks for years, with separations and restraining orders filed by the mother. Though details are unknown regarding the father's specific behavior toward Farook, or how Farook felt regarding his father, the family life was not only chaotic but frightening as well. The impact of this on Farook remains unknown. As with LaRose, Farook may have inherited some tendency toward violence and suicide from his chronically unstable father.

Discussion

The first point to note about these perpetrators is that not one of them was an ordinary person from an ordinary home. They had histories of violence, criminal activity, psychotic symptoms, and/or came from severely dysfunctional families.

The three primary psychopaths who were presented (Tamerlan Tsarnaev, Carlos Bledsoe, Omar Mateen) all had a history of violence that predated any interest in jihad. They were violent before their radicalization and they were violent after their radicalization. There was no dramatic change in their personalities or behavior, just a shift in the targets and the magnitude of their violence. These were callous people who seem to fit the category of abrasive, belligerent psychopaths. In contrast, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had a history of illegal behavior, but apart from one incident of fighting, does not appear to have been violent until the bombing. He appears to fit the category of the charming, deceptive psychopath.

Whereas Tamerlan Tsarnaev, Bledsoe, and Mateen were all successful in finding one or more wives, Nidal Hasan and Ayanle Hassan Ali remained single. They also were largely friendless. This is not unusual among other types of psychotic perpetrators (Langman, 2015; Langman, in press). Whereas Ali was unemployed, Hasan was able to function well enough to be a military psychiatrist, though his job performance was poor and deteriorated to the point that he alienated and frightened his colleagues.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev was a seemingly capable young man, yet he was unemployed. On the one hand, this could have been a result of the psychopathic trait of "parasitic lifestyle" (Hare, 1993). In other words, psychopaths often avoid work, preferring to live off of others. On the other hand, based on the evidence cited above, Tsarnaev appears to have had adult-onset schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a debilitating condition that often makes it impossible for people to function in a job.

Though enough information has been made public on LaRose and Farook to place them both in the traumatized category of perpetrators, details about their early history and its impact on them is not available. What is known may be just the tip of the iceberg. Nonetheless, their family backgrounds are similar to those seen among traumatized school shooters.

Identifying homegrown violent extremists before they have the opportunity to commit their attacks is a critical issue for professionals in many settings, including schools, colleges, and universities (Van Brunt, Murphy, and Zedginidze, 2017). In addition to looking for signs of radicalization, the information provided in this article demonstrates the importance of exploring the subjects' family backgrounds and psychological functioning for evidence of psychopathic traits, psychotic symptoms, and histories of trauma.

Limitations

The primary limitations of this study are the small size of the sample and the incomplete information regarding the subjects' life histories and psychological dynamics.

Conclusion

This article has provided evidence that at least some homegrown jihadists fit the psychological typology seen among many school shooters and other types of mass attackers. Perhaps one reason that psychological issues are not well-documented among terrorists is simply that there may be a lack of information. Psychopaths are notorious for impression-management — the ability to hide their dark side. Psychotic symptoms happen inside someone's mind, and are generally not observable to others. And child abuse typically occurs behind closed doors, hidden from public view. Furthermore, when terrorists survive their attacks and end up in court, they often strive to deny any symptoms of mental illness out of fear that being perceived as "crazy" will invalidate their ideological justifications for violence. If more information about terrorists was available, this might reveal far more psychological disturbance than is generally apparent.

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