Irrational Rationales: Vicarious and Fictional Justifications among Ideological Killers

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This article explores the motivations of ideological killers by investigating their justifications for violence. These justifications are divided into three categories: those that are grounded in actual social/political realities that are present in the lives of the perpetrators; those that utilize geographically and/or temporally distant vicarious victimisations; and those that are fictional, i.e., they have no basis in reality. These concepts are illustrated through discussions of a range of perpetrators of ideological violence. The implications of vicarious and fictional motivations are discussed in terms of our understanding of the psychology of perpetrators, the process of radicalisation, and counterterrorism efforts.

Keywords: terrorism, terrorists, ideological violence, mass attackers, mass killers, counterterrorism, irrational rationales, paranoia

The most striking phrase I have encountered in the literature on terrorism is Jerrold Post's statement, "*The cause is not the cause*," (italics in original) meaning that the cause that perpetrators cite as the justification for their attacks is not the real reason for their violence. To Post, the "cause" that is claimed is really "the justification, the rationale for frustrated, alienated individuals who have had their frustration channeled against a particular group" (2007, p. 6). In this view, the desire for violence pre-exists the rationales cited for violence. Post articulated this dynamic as follows: "*political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces*." To justify this, their "special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize *acts they are psychologically compelled to commit*" (Post, 1998, p. 25; italics in original).

This distinction between conscious vs. unconscious motivations has been discussed by Meloy and Yakeley (2014): "The terrorist may deliberately convey an overt political or religious message in his violent actions. However, the terrorist act also contains within it a myriad of unconscious individual and collective fantasies, traumatic memories, defenses and wishes."

Similarly, it has been stated that despite whatever motivations terrorists may claim, "perpetrators' true motivations are rarely fully accessible" (Spaaij, 2012, p. 20).

Fredholm argued that despite their declared allegiance to Islam, many jihadists had little knowledge or interest in religion – what came first was their desire for violence: "the decision to engage in combat appeared to have come before any subsequent interest in the religious justification for doing so" (2016, p. 114). According to Fredholm, "ideology was something that was used rather than followed. It did not cause actions or decisions, it was merely drawn upon when convenient." He said that ideology was "more of an after-the-fact justification for terrorism than a before-the-fact motivating factor" (p. 109). If the desire to kill precedes the justification, then rationales must be fabricated or found, regardless of their truth or validity.

In fact, multiple researchers have pointed out that terrorists often cite justifications for violence that have at best a tenuous

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connection to reality. Kellen stated that terrorists often view the world "in a grossly unrealistic light" (1998, p. 43), and Sprinzak wrote that terrorists "imagine a nonexistent 'fantasy war'" (1998, p. 85). A discussion of online "pseudo-communities" that often influence ideological killers noted that such groups "potentially range along a spectrum from moderate reality distortion to frank delusion" (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014, p. 8).

Barry-Walsh, James, and Mullen (2020) referred to terrorists having "grievances, real or otherwise," and Sinai said that perpetrators were driven by crises that were either "actual or self-perceived" (2022, p. 307). The difference between real grievances vs. those that are not real has important ramifications for understanding ideological violence. This difference is often acknowledged, but not explored.

Horgan added another layer to the analysis by noting that grievances may be related to real events, but that these events have no connection to the perpetrator: "We know terrorism can be, and often is, based on imagined or 'virtual grievances', and whatever perceived 'real' grievances are identified as having existed at one time or another" (2008, p. 84). He emphasised that "victimization may not necessarily be proximal or real" (p. 88). Similarly, Meloy and Yakeley (2014) noted that though lone actor terrorists express moral outrage regarding one or more events, the "moral outrage is often vicariously experienced, and not embedded in the personal life" of the terrorist.

Despite the recognition that the justifications for ideological violence often have little to no connection to reality, this fact has not received the attention that it deserves. This article is a non-empirical exploration of ideological killers' use of irrational rationales. First, the relevance of psychological factors will be discussed briefly, followed by explanations of three categories of justifications for violence. Then a range of ideological killers will be presented. These brief conceptualisations will be followed by a more in-depth analysis of Osama bin Laden's rationales for violence.

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Researchers have been arguing for decades about the mental health – or lack thereof – of terrorists. A common view is captured by Silber and Bhatt who wrote, "individuals undergoing radicalization appear as 'ordinary' citizens, who look, act, talk, and walk like everyone around them" (2007, p. 85). This view was supported by Bergen, who commented that American jihadists "are, on average, as well educated and emotionally stable as the typical citizen. They are ordinary Americans" (2017, p. 15).

In contrast to this view, there has been a growing recognition of mental health issues among ideological killers, with more psychological problems found among lone-actor perpetrators than those affiliated with a group (Corner and Gill, 2014). Despite this, the belief that terrorists are psychologically normal persists.

One reason that mental health issues in this population may be underestimated is that people may associate mental illness with the concept of insanity. Insanity is a legal concept, not a clinical one. The question of sanity in a legal context refers to whether or not the person was aware that what they were doing was considered to be morally and legally wrong. Insanity constitutes only the most extreme range of mental health issues. Often this involves severe psychological dysfunction such as psychosis.

As with insanity, there may be a widespread lack of understanding about psychosis. People might think that psychosis resembles a combination of delirium and dementia, rendering a person incapable of engaging in meaningful behavior. What is often not understood is that people can be highly functional in multiple areas of their lives and yet experience psychotic symptoms.

For example, Seung Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech killer, went to classes and handed in homework assignments. He wrote a novel. He compiled a multimedia manifesto, including photographs, text, and videos of his rants. He purchased a gun, practiced with it, and bought chains to secure the doors of the building he was going to attack, thus preventing people from escaping and law enforcement from entering. As he engaged in all these purposeful, organized activities, he was psychotic, with both paranoid and grandiose delusions (Langman, 2009, 2015).

Though insanity and psychosis may intersect, there is only a tenuous connection between them. Many psychotic killers have known that what they were doing was wrong, as evidenced by their efforts to avoid the police, anticipations that police would intervene, or expectations that they would be arrested and imprisoned. Thus, they were psychotic but sane. This presumably applies to virtually all terrorists who go to great lengths not to be stopped because they know that what they are doing is considered wrong. Based on this, they are not insane. This does not mean, however, that they were not psychologically disturbed. The most relevant psychotic symptom for the cases discussed here is that of paranoid delusions.

Another factor causing mental health issues among terrorists to be overlooked may be that people are not aware of the wide range of diagnoses that can affect someone's behavior. Statements are often made that mass murderers or terrorists are not mentally ill, but the term "mental illness" is rarely defined when used in this context. It may be intended to refer to schizophrenia or psychosis. Even if perpetrators are not schizophrenic, however, this does not mean that there are no psychological issues that contributed to their attacks.

Besides psychotic disorders, perpetrators may have traits of various personality disorders, particularly narcissistic, antisocial, and sadistic (Langman, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). People with these disorders have a disregard for social norms, lack empathy, guilt, and remorse, and find pleasure in hurting and killing. In addition, people with paranoid personality disorder perceive plots and threats where they do not exist. Other relevant psychological factors can include depression and trauma-related issues (Langman, 2019a, 2019b, 2021; Lankford, 2013).

DEFINITIONS

Grounded Motivations

Many terrorist groups exist in regions of the world in which there are conflicts regarding territory, governance, and an imbalance of power among groups. The motivations or ideologies in these cases can be considered "grounded" in that they are based on actual social or political realities.

In addition, for people in regions of actual conflict or oppression, the political situation is something that they live with daily. It is currently and geographically present in their lives. They may even have lost friends or loved ones to the conflict, as well as been injured themselves. Thus, in addition to the ideologies being grounded in reality, the people who hold the ideologies are personally connected to their causes.

The concept – and rationality – of grounded motivations are captured by Crenshaw:

> The wide range of terrorist activity cannot be dismissed as "irrational" and thus pathological, unreasonable, or inexplicable. The resort to terrorism need not be an aberration. It may be a reasonable and calculated response to circumstances. To say that the reasoning that leads to the choice of terrorism may be logical is not an argument about moral justifiability (1998, p. 10).

Thus, grounded – or rational – ideologies or motivations are rooted in real-life situations. As noted by Crenshaw, this does not mean that they are morally justifiable, only that the violence produced is in response to social or political realities affecting the lives of the perpetrators.

Vicarious Motivations

On first glance, vicarious motivations for violence may appear to be valid and rational. After all, many people engage in humanitarian efforts on behalf of people and causes to which they have no direct connection. Such efforts may be spurred by compassion, conscience, and empathy. When it comes to ideological attackers, however, there are multiple reasons for questioning the validity of their vicarious justifications.

First, their claims of concern for others occur only in regard to killing perceived evil-doers. The perpetrators did not engage in any behaviors that would indicate compassion or concern for the people they allegedly were defending or avenging. They did not donate money to relevant charities, communicate with politicians, participate in fund-raising efforts, reach out to victims, pursue careers or volunteer opportunities in international relations, join protests, or march in the streets. Rather than being embedded in a context of compassion, their claims of concern are an isolated phenomenon.

Second, the perpetrators' lives typically include histories of immoral and illegal behavior (Langman, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). The perpetrators are frequently insensitive, callous, cruel, or sadistic. In other words, ideological killers often lack the very traits that might motivate their actions: compassion, conscience, and empathy. Despite their deficits in these areas, they claim that they are so motivated by concern for others that they are not only willing to commit mass murder, but also throw away their own lives, risking either death or life imprisonment. This strains credulity.

Additional light is shed on this issue by the work of Grossman (2009), who documented the extent to which soldiers in combat historically have either refused to shoot at their enemies, or deliberately shot above enemy lines. Even when facing an enemy trying to kill them, the taboo against taking a human life was often so strong that it prevented soldiers from killing. This remarkable fact demonstrates that even in combat situations empathy and conscience do not result in violence – they prevent violence. Thus, Grossman's work challenges the idea that empathy and conscience vicariously motivate mass murder. If empathy and conscience can prevent violence against people who are trying to kill you, how can empathy and conscience motivate violence against innocent people who have done you no harm?

The points made so far all work to invalidate vicarious justifications. The aspect that constitutes the most irrational aspect of vicarious justifications is the use of collective guilt as a reason to kill innocent people. For example, Brenton Tarrant cited the death of a girl in a jihadist attack in Sweden to justify his attack on innocent Muslims in New Zealand. From a logical standpoint, this is nonsense.

Anyone could claim that their people – whether defined by race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc. – are being or have been victimised somewhere in the world. Justifying the murder of anyone who belongs to a designated group because of the actions of one person is absurd, yet this commonly occurs among ideological killers. Using distant, disconnected claims as justification for murdering innocent people is an irrational, manufactured excuse for killing.

As noted above, this dynamic has been expressed as "the cause is not the cause" (Post, 2007), that ideology is an "after-the-fact" justification" (Fredholm, 2016), and that attackers justify their actions with virtual or imagined grievances (Barry-Walsh, James, & Mullen, 2020; Horgan, 2008; Sinai, 2022). This becomes particularly clear when an investigation of the perpetrators reveals underlying psychological dynamics behind the killers' public claims (Langman, 2019a, 2019b, 2021).

Fictional Motivations

In contrast to grounded and vicarious motivations, both of which refer to actual events, many ideological killers justify their attacks by citing non-existent threats or victimisations. They claim that their territory is being invaded, that their people are being raped, oppressed, or enslaved, or that their group is facing annihilation. These claims are believed even though they have no basis in reality.

It must be noted that fictional rationales are often rooted in extreme prejudice. Though prejudices may all contain irrational beliefs, the concept of irrational rationales needs to be distinguished from ordinary group prejudices. For example, believing that African Americans are less intelligent than white people is a prejudice, but believing that Blacks are conspiring to annihilate the white race is a paranoid belief. Similarly, believing that Jews engage in shady business practices is a prejudice, but believing that they are plotting to take over the world and enslave non-Jews is a paranoid belief. Such beliefs have no basis in reality – they are fictional. As noted above, some terrorists view the world "in a grossly unrealistic light" (Kellen, 1998, p. 43). Similarly, Sprinzak observed that terrorists often "imagine a nonexistent 'fantasy war'" (1998, p. 85).

CASE EXAMPLES

This section provides brief overviews of the justifications cited by ideological killers. The perpetrators were selected to cover a range of perceived threats and/or who targeted different populations. There are, of course, many other ideologies involved in attacks than those included here. How well the concepts discussed in this article apply to other ideological justifications will need to be investigated.

Domestic Jihadists

Tamerlan Tsarnaev (and his younger brother Dzhokhar) bombed the Boston Marathon in 2013, allegedly to protest U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The brothers, however, had no connection to either country. They did not come from Iraq or Afghanistan, and had never been to – and had no relatives in – either country. Whatever was going on in the Middle East did not touch them. This is an example of a perpetrator citing vicarious victimisations as justification for violence.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev was caught up in conspiracy theories, such as believing that the attacks on 9/11 were carried out by the U.S. government. He also read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* one of the most infamous anti-Semitic documents in history (Gessen, 2015; McPhee, 2017). This document alleges an international Jewish conspiracy for world domination. Thus, Tsarnaev's thinking contained paranoid, fictional elements.

In addition, Tsarnaev apparently became psychotic in young adulthood (Langman, 2019b). He confided to a friend that he had a voice inside his head and "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, & Wren, 2013). Whether the voice commanded him to commit the attack is not known.

Omar Mateen, who attacked Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016, claimed that he did so to protest the United States' military actions in Syria and Iraq. He had no connection to Syria and Iraq, either personally or through relatives. In addition, he claimed allegiance to multiple terrorist organisations, including those that were enemies with each other (Westervelt, 2016). This suggests that he had no real understanding of Middle Eastern politics. It appears that he simply used actions by the U.S. military to justify an attack that he committed for other reasons (Langman, 2019b).

Like Tsarnaev, Mateen may have become psychotic. An acquaintance said that in the weeks leading up to his attack, Mateen had stayed up all night researching anti-psychotic medications because "He'd been real worried about whether or not he'd slipped into psychosis" (Woodall, 2016).

Mateen and the Tsarnaevs were not observant Muslims and for most of their lives showed little interest in religion or politics. In addition, Mateen and Tamerlan Tsarnaev both had explosive tempers, engaged in domestic violence, deception, infidelity, and assault. Evidence of conscience, empathy, and compassion was distinctly lacking (Langman, 2019b).

Apart from the political justifications they used, Mateen and Tsarnaev had multiple psychological issues that drove them to violence. What Fredholm said of many jihadists applies to Mateen and Tsarnaev: "ideology was something that was used rather than followed. It did not cause actions or decisions, it was merely drawn upon when convenient," being "more of an after-the-fact justification for terrorism than a before-the-fact motivating factor" (2016, p. 109).

White Supremacists: Anti-Semitic

Though most of the perpetrators discussed in this article are contemporary, I am including Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitic beliefs both because of the magnitude of their impact during his lifetime, as well as their continuing influence on subsequent ideological killers. In addition, the Holocaust constitutes a reminder of how dangerous irrational rationales can become when they take root and spread.

Hitler's anti-Semitism was so vast and multifaceted that it can only be touched on briefly here. In *Mein Kampf* (Hitler, 2009), Hitler expressed multiple paranoid beliefs about Jews – just a few will be cited. He claimed that sexual relationships between Jews and non-Jews were not a matter of people falling in love, but a deliberate Jewish plot to pollute the purity of German blood. He viewed this as an attempt to bring down the Aryan people. Regarding the labor movement, Hitler wrote, "To all external appearances, this movement strives to ameliorate the conditions under which the workers live; but in reality its aim is to enslave and thereby annihilate the non-Jewish races" (2009, p. 222).

Hitler viewed Jews as being arch-communists, claiming that "Marxism itself systematically aims at delivering the world into the hands of the Jews" (2009, p. 262). Paradoxically, he also viewed Jews as arch-capitalists, stating that they were "preparing the nation to become the slaves of international finance and its masters, the Jews" (p. 169). He claimed that "Jewish finance demands not only the absolute economic destruction of

Germany but its complete political enslavement" (2009, p. 413), and stated that "the international Jew … is to-day the absolute master of Russia" (p. 438). In Hitler's view, Jews aspired to control the world: "One can only understand the Jews when one realizes their final purpose: to master the world and then destroy it" (Waite, 1977, p. 99).

Of course, none of this had any connection to reality. The Holocaust was one of history's most egregious examples of ideological violence built on a foundation of fictional motivations. This was not a battle between two armies, but a powerful nation massacring a vulnerable minority based on paranoid beliefs. As noted in a psychological biography of Hitler, "Paranoid delusions were Hitler's most significant psychopathological complex" (Redlich, 1998, p. 293). If it is hard to accept that a national leader could be delusional, Waite noted, "Hitler must be seen at the same time as both a mentally deranged human being and a consummately skillful political leader of high intelligence" (1977, p. xv). Despite his intelligence, however, "Hitler's fantastic view of the world … bore very little relationship to external reality. But it did correspond very closely to his own psychic needs" (p. 416). In the words of Post, "*political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces*" (1998, p. 25).

In contrast to Hitler, for whom we have a wealth of information, we know virtually nothing about Robert Bowers, who attacked a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018. What we do know, however, is that he had at least two paranoid beliefs about Jews. First, he believed that they were secretly bringing illegal immigrants into the country. Second, he claimed that Jews "were committing genocide to his people" (Amend, 2018). His claims had no basis in reality – they were pure fiction.

John Earnest, who attacked a synagogue in Poway, California, in 2019, expressed fictional beliefs and cited vicarious victimisations to justify his violence. His fundamental fictional belief was that Jews conspired to annihilate white people. He wrote in his manifesto, "Every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race" and "Every Jew currently alive plays a part in the destruction of my race" (Earnest, 2019, pp. 1, 4).

Earnest also had a cluster of other unfounded beliefs about Jews. He blamed Jews for a variety of things that he objected to, including feminism, pornography, and race-mixing. He accused Jews of starting unspecified wars, of "using usury and banks to enslave nations," and "for their large role in every slave trade for the past two-thousand years" (Earnest, 2019, p. 4). Most surprisingly, considering the Jews' long history of being victims of violence, including massacres, pogroms, and the Holocaust, Earnest blamed them for "their cruel and bloody history of genocidal behavior" (2019, p. 4). Earnest did not identify a single Jew who was guilty, nor specify how Jews as a group were guilty of the allegations. His claims were fictional.

Though there was nothing that Earnest could point to in reality as evidence of a Jewish conspiracy to commit genocide against white people, this did not stop him from trying. In his manifesto he wrote, "You are not forgotten Simon of Trent, the horror that you and countless children have endured at the hands of the Jews will never be forgiven" (Earnest, 2019, p. 1).

This is a case of the notorious "blood libel" in which Jews were accused of killing Christians and using their blood in religious rituals. In 1475, a child named Simon went missing and his body was eventually found. Jews were blamed for his death and tortured until they confessed they had killed him. The blood libel was itself a paranoid belief with no basis in reality, yet Earnest reached back over five hundred years to find a reason to justify killing Jews. This is an example of a vicarious victimisation that was also a fictionalised victimisation.

Earnest also cited the crucifixion of Jesus as justification for killing Jews. This is also a case of a fictionalised vicarious victimisation. It is vicarious because it happened long ago to someone else, and it is fictional because Jesus was not killed by Jews, but by Romans. Though the crucifixion of Jesus has been used for centuries to generate hostility against Jews, this makes no more sense than if Jews went around killing Italians because Romans crucified Jesus, who was a Jew.

Though Earnest was also anti-Muslim and attacked a mosque prior to his attack at the synagogue, his manifesto consisted largely of anti-Semitic rants. The next set of perpetrators viewed Muslims as their primary enemies.

White Supremacists: Anti-Muslim

Anders Breivik, who committed a bombing and mass shooting in Norway in 2011, viewed Muslims as an existential threat to white Europe. He had two levels of paranoid beliefs. First, he believed that he was acting in response to the "the ongoing demographical annihilation of the Europeans" (Breivik, 2011, p. 1,154). He was convinced that this annihilation was planned by Muslim immigrants. He also believed that Muslims were being brought to Norway by liberal politicians who were colluding with them in the destruction of their own country (Seierstad, 2015, p. 444). Such claims were unfounded. Yet, because he believed in the government conspiracy, he did not attack Muslims, but rather the Norwegian government and youths attending a liberal summer camp.

Breivik also cited vicarious victimisations, recounting centuries of crimes committed by Muslims throughout the world, focusing on slavery and rape. He also recounted his own alleged victimisations by Muslims, as well as those of people he knew. The facts he cites (even if they are true), however, do not in any way support the allegations of Muslim conspiracy, invasion, and desire to enslave and annihilate white Europeans.

Breivik had a lifelong history of family dysfunction, poor social skills, misconduct, failures, bizarre thoughts, and sadistic fantasies. His behavior prior to, during, and after his attacks indicates profound psychological issues (Borchgrevink, 2013; Langman, 2019a; Seierstad, 2015). During his trial, the first diagnostic evaluation concluded that he had paranoid schizophrenia; the second evaluation said he had dissocial (antisocial)

personality disorder with narcissistic traits (Seierstad, 2015). Because these are not mutually exclusive diagnoses, they may have both been correct. Breivik displayed sadistic delight as he gunned down teenagers and was absolutely callous, unrepentant, and devoid of empathy afterwards (Borchgrevink, 2013; Seierstad, 2015).

Brenton Tarrant, who attacked mosques in New Zealand in 2019, also had multiple paranoid beliefs. He wrote about "white genocide" in his manifesto and justified his attack by stating that he wanted "To take revenge for the enslavement of millions of Europeans taken from their lands by the Islamic slavers" (Tarrant, 2019, p. 5).

Like Breivik, Tarrant not only viewed Muslims as an existential threat to white Europeans, but believed that Europeans were conspiring to bring Muslims into Europe:

> Beholden to no one and hiding their true intent behold [behind] a faux-religious facade, these NGO groups ferry the invaders to European shores aboard their own vessels, directly shipping this vast army straight into European nations to plunder, rape and ethnically displace the native European people (Tarrant, 2019, p. 60).

As with the previous examples, there was no basis for Tarrant's paranoid claims.

Tarrant, in addition to his fictional justifications for killing Muslims, also engaged in a vicarious justification. He cited the death of an 11-year-old girl in Sweden named Ebba Akerlund who was killed in a jihadist attack. In this case, the death of Akerlund was a real event, but it occurred on the other side of the world – he had no connection to her. He simply exploited her death for his own purposes.

Tarrant also cited cases in which white women were raped by Muslim men, as well as claiming there was a conspiracy to hide these incidents: "the state, the media and the judicial system work in unison to hide these atrocities" (Tarrant, 2019, p. 32). This constitutes a third paranoid belief.

Beyond recent vicarious victimisations, Tarrant wanted "revenge against islam for the 1300 years of war and devastation that it has brought upon the people of the West and other peoples of the world" (p. 13). Thus, Tarrant's justifications included geographically and temporally distant vicarious victimisations, as well as paranoid fictional beliefs.

White Supremacists: Anti-Black

For Dylann Roof, who attacked an African American church in South Carolina in 2015, the primary threat to white people came from African Americans. Like Breivik and Tarrant, Roof had multiple paranoid beliefs. First, he believed that African Americans were waging a war against white Americans. Second, he believed that American media were colluding to hide this racial warfare from the public (United States of America vs. Dylann Roof, 2016). Again, these were unfounded claims.

Roof also had anti-Semitic beliefs. He thought that Jews controlled the media, and since he blamed the media for withholding information about African Americans waging a war against whites, the implication is that this conspiracy of silence was the work of Jews. In addition, he said that Jews are "trying to destroy whites" (Ballenger, 2016, p. 23). Thus, in his view, two groups were actively seeking white genocide – African Americans and Jews. He also claimed that Black men were "raping our women and taking over the nation" and "black people are killing white people every day on the streets and they rape … a hundred white women a day" (United States of America vs. Dylann Storm Roof, 2020, pp. 11, 14).

Besides his fictional justifications, Roof also used vicarious victimisations. He said that he was radicalised by reading an article about Black-on-white crime. Even if what he read was accurate information, he had no personal connection to any of these incidents. The miscellaneous crimes he read about simply served to justify his paranoid beliefs.

Roof was a depressed, anxious, virtually nonfunctional adult with strange thoughts, odd preoccupations, and a poor grasp of reality (Ballenger, 2016; Langman, 2019a; United States of America vs. Dylann Roof, 2016). After his attack, mental health professionals offered a variety of diagnostic opinions, including depression, severe anxiety, autism, schizoid personality disorder, delusions, and possible schizophrenia (United States of America vs. Dylann Storm Roof, 2020). Roof exhibited a shocking callousness during his trial, with no sign of any empathy for the victims and their families (Ballenger, 2017, p. 12).

Like other perpetrators, Payton Gendron, who shot African Americans in Buffalo, New York, in 2022, believed the white race was facing genocide. Strangely, despite his rant about white genocide, Gendron wrote, "In 2022, we currently have the largest number of people of our race in history" (Gendron, 2022, p. 172). Gendron's manifesto contains a large portion of Tarrant's manifesto which has simply been copied. The primary difference is that whereas Tarrant focused on Muslims, Gendron viewed Blacks and Jews as the enemies. Like Tarrant, he engaged in vicarious victimisations, citing cases of white women being raped by non-white men.

Gendron also expressed paranoid beliefs about Jews controlling the U.S. government, the media, and banking. He wrote, "Jews are the biggest problem the Western world has ever had. They must be called out and killed" (Gendron, 2022, p. 24). He stated that he learned on 4chan that "the White race is dying out, that blacks are disproportionately killing Whites, … and that the Jews and the elite were behind this" (p. 13). He wrote, "The new world order that the Jews advocate for is one where they enslave all other goy's" (2022, p. 30). He explained his attack by stating, "No longer will I willingly serve the people who are trying to end me and my race" (p. 13). His ideology was a concoction of vicarious victimisations and fictional, paranoid beliefs.

White Supremacist: Anti-Latino

In another variation on the threat to white people, Patrick Crusius killed Latinos in El Paso, Texas, in 2019, claiming that he was saving the United States from "destruction." He wrote,

"This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion" (2019, p. 1). He believed that unspecified corporations and the Democratic party were conspiring to bring Mexicans into the country, and that these "invaders" "will turn Texas into an instrument of a political coup which will hasten the destruction of our country" (p. 3).

White Supremacist: Anti-Government

Timothy McVeigh, who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, had a different focus than the previous perpetrators. Though he was racist and anti-Semitic (Painting, 2016), he did not target Blacks or Jews. Instead, he viewed the U.S. government as a threat to his way of life.

One view of his motivation was that he was retaliating against the government for the loss of lives in the incidents at Ruby Ridge and Waco, with Waco being the primary catalyst for his attack. He said of Waco, "This could be the start of the government coming house-to-house to retrieve the weapons from the citizens" (Serrano, 1998, p. 71). At this level, he cited vicarious victimisations to justify his violence, as well as fears for what these incidents portended regarding future government actions.

McVeigh's interest in violence, however, long pre-dated Waco. In his late teens he became obsessed with the book *The Turner Diaries* (Serrano, 1998), a novel about white supremacists who are also anti-government and who blow up a federal building with a truck-bomb – the very act that McVeigh carried out in Oklahoma City.

Prior to Waco, McVeigh sent a letter to the editor of his local paper in which he ranted about America. He ended by saying, "Is civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might" (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 99). Thus, well before Waco, he was contemplating bloodshed.

McVeigh, however, was also paranoid. He believed that the Center for Missing and Exploited Children was part of a conspiracy to track people, and that by the year 2000, the government would have DNA, handprints, and footprints of the entire U.S. population (Painting, 2016, p. 484). As part of his concern about the government collecting data on citizens, McVeigh considered burning down a federal building in Buffalo, NY, because of the information he believed it contained (p. 484).

He also believed that he was being followed by the military and feared for his life and that of his family (Painting, 2016, p. 249). He claimed that while in the Army, the government had implanted a computer chip in his backside (pp. 231, 239, 342, 358). He also believed that infants in California were having microchips implanted in them (p. 377). Another paranoid belief was that AIDS had been created by the U.S. government and used for population control (p. 289).

McVeigh believed that there was such a thing as the New World Order and that it might target him personally (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, pp. 141, 152). He believed that some entity (perhaps the New World Order) was going to enslave humanity (Painting, 2016, p. 357). He thought that there were "factions of the government who wanted to gain world domination" and believed that the government had built concentration camps for U.S. citizens (p. 259). In fact, he sent his sister a pamphlet that claimed the government was building 130 concentration camps for dissident citizens, as well as crematoria (Michel & Herbeck, 2001, p. 108).

After his military service, McVeigh reportedly was treated at the V.A. in Buffalo, New York, for manic-depression (bipolar disorder) and paranoid schizophrenia (Painting, 2016, pp. 288, 342). The accuracy of these diagnoses is unclear; nevertheless, it indicates that prior to his attack McVeigh was viewed as emotionally unstable, paranoid, and out of touch with reality. After the attack, mental health professionals struggled to make sense of him. Diagnostic possibilities included depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, a dissociative disorder, paranoia, delusions/psychosis, borderline personality disorder, and narcissism (pp. 396, 398, 403–404).

McVeigh's attack resulted from a combination of paranoia, failures in multiple life domains, a desire for fame through violence, a myriad of mental health issues, and actual events that in his mind confirmed his paranoia (Langman, 2019a). During his trial, he demonstrated a chilling lack of empathy regarding the victims and their families, referring to them as the "woe is me crowd" (Painting, 2016, p. 28).

Discussion

Though there are similarities among the previously cited perpetrators, there are also noteworthy differences. One difference is the variation in the degree of reality among the perpetrators' concerns. For example, Mateen and the Tsarnaevs cited current government actions in the Middle East, and McVeigh was outraged by actual government actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco. Whereas Mateen and the Tsarnaevs only cited vicarious victimisations, McVeigh apparently used vicarious victimisations to support his pre-existing paranoid beliefs about the government. Tsarnaev also had paranoid beliefs, though their influence on his attack remains unknown.

In other examples, Breivik, Bowers, Tarrant, Crusius, and Gendron complained about immigrants entering their countries. In each case, there actually were immigrants. The fictional element lay in their beliefs about the annihilation of their race or the destruction of their countries, as well as paranoia about governments, NGOs, Jews, the Democratic party, or corporations colluding with the perceived "invaders" in their evil intentions.

Though several perpetrators believed that enemy groups were plotting the destruction of the perpetrators' own groups, it is not clear that Crusius attributed this intention to Mexicans. He may have simply believed that an influx of Mexicans would destroy the nation, but not attributed such destruction to them as a goal that they were conspiring to achieve.

Roof's belief that African Americans were waging war

against white people reportedly was sparked by his reading about "Black on white" crime. Because African Americans have committed crimes against whites, he could build his fictional beliefs on a grain of truth. The same applies to Breivik's and Tarrant's reference to crimes committed by Muslims. Where there was no truth, however, was in their beliefs that the white race was facing annihilation.

Bronner (2018) noted how people who profess bigoted beliefs in general (not exclusively ideological attackers) blame the groups they hate for their own failures and suffering. He also noted their convoluted, irrational thinking: "The bigot is engaged not only in demeaning the target of his prejudice but also in turning himself into a victim. In his eyes, the real victim becomes the imaginary oppressor and the real oppressor becomes the imaginary victim" (2018, p. 89). This articulates the dynamic of white perpetrators in countries where whites constitute the majority, conjuring a world in which they are the victims of the minorities they hate.

In contrast to the perpetrators' whose complaints had some basis in truth, the claims of Hitler, Earnest, and Gendron about Jewish plans for world domination and/or genocide were utterly disconnected from reality. The irrationality of anti-Semitic hatred and violence has long been noted. Trachtenberg stated, "Hatred of the Jew rests upon no rational base;" the Jew as a figure of evil "has nothing to do with facts or logic" (1983, pp. 2–3). In the words of Miller, "A Jew is not hated for doing or being something specific … Jews are hated because people harbor a forbidden hatred and are eager to legitimate it" (1991, p. 166). According to Ostow, "The antisemite has two sources of pain, two enemies: whatever external real inimical force may be discernible, and an illusory one contrived to explain the existence of the former and the suffering it creates" (1996, p. 31). These analyses resonate with the conceptualisations cited above of Post, Meloy and Yakeley, and others who noted underlying psychological motivations behind the justifications expressed by ideological killers.

In summary, though all the perpetrators discussed above committed attacks based on irrational rationales, there were variations in the degree to which they were disconnected from reality and how much they invented conspiracies among their perceived enemies. Having illustrated the concept of irrational rationales through the above thumbnail sketches, the next section applies the concept to the complex case of Osama bin Laden to see how much his ideology was built upon vicarious victimisations and fictional beliefs.

OSAMA BIN LADEN

Though I have previously explored a range of dynamics that may have contributed to Osama bin Laden's violence (Langman, 2021), this section views his stated justifications through the lens of vicarious and fictional motivations. How grounded was bin Laden's ideology? In his own words, "we only killed Americans in New York after they supported the Jews in Palestine and invaded the Arabian Peninsula" (El-Ansary, 2009, p. 203). Thus, bin Laden's two rationales for violence against the United States were that there was a U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. supported Israel. On the surface, both of these claims are based in reality. A closer look, however, reveals underlying complexities.

U.S. Military in Saudi Arabia

The issue of the U.S. military in Saudi Arabia is explored in depth elsewhere (Langman, 2021). Put briefly, the military was there because the Saudi king asked the U.S. defend his nation against Saddam Hussein. Prior to this, bin Laden had offered his own paltry "army" to the king as defenders of the nation. The king spurned bin Laden's offer and turned to the U.S. for assistance. Bin Laden was outraged and humiliated. Bin Laden conjured the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia into the worst event in Muslim history: "Never has Islam suffered a greater disaster than this invasion" (Anonymous/Scheuer, 2002, p. 114). He claimed, "America has committed the greatest mistake in entering a peninsula which no religion from among the non-Muslim nations has entered for fourteen centuries" (Atwan, 2008, p. 162).

The idea that only Muslims had been in the Arab peninsula for fourteen centuries was absurd. Jews and Christians lived in the land at the time of the Prophet and continued to do so for centuries. In fact, there has been a continuous Jewish presence on the peninsula since ancient times (Langman, 2021). In modern times, many non-Muslims have been in Saudi Arabia. In fact, Bin Laden's father, who owned Saudi Arabia's premiere construction company, hired an international array of non-Muslims to work for him (Coll, 2008). Furthermore, bin Laden's father had no objection to the U.S. military being in the land, as evidenced by his working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Coll, 2008, pp. 76; 102–103).

In addition, the Saudi government had a history of working with the U.S. military. In the 1940s, the Saudi king permitted the United States to build an airbase near Dhahran (Oren, 2007, p. 461). In the 1960s, Crown Prince Faisal "prevailed upon President John F. Kennedy to send American forces to protect the Kingdom during the border war against Yemen" (Wright, 2006, p. 87). Thus, there was a history of American troops assisting Saudi Arabia.

Despite the history of non-Muslims living in the Arabian peninsula, as well as his own family's cooperation with Americans, and the Saudi government's history of relying on American troops for protection, bin Laden conjured the presence of Americans into an unsurpassed fictionalised victimisation:

> The enemy invaded the land of our *umma* [Muslim world], violated her honor, shed her blood, and occupied her sanctuaries. This aggression has reached such a catastrophic and disastrous point as to have brought about a calamity unprecedented in the history of our *umma*" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 15).

Bin Laden was not only outraged by Americans on Saudi soil, but paranoid, making claims of multiple conspiracies related to the U.S. presence. According to Coll, "Osama voiced a fear that America had a secret plan to use its presence in Saudi Arabia to 'secularize Saudi Arabia'" (2008, p. 379). Miller stated that bin Laden believed this conspiracy "was planned, decades ago, with the aim of subjecting the Islamic world to laws other than those revealed by God" (2015, p. 124). Bin Laden claimed that Saudi Arabia had become "an American colony" and was under "dual American-Israeli occupation" (Atwan, 2008, pp. 162–163). He referred to U.S. troops as "an invading infidel enemy" (Scheuer, 2002, p. 70) and announced that Americans had "captured" Saudi Arabia (Miller, 2015, p. 19). As with other perpetrators, bin Laden utilised a blending of fact and fiction. The presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia was a fact, but from this fact bin Laden conjured up paranoid beliefs and fictional victimisations.

U.S. Support of Israel

Bin Laden was not Palestinian. He grew up far away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and was not a victim of oppression or injustice. His father was an extremely successful, wealthy man who was personal friends with the Saudi king. The plight of the Palestinians was far removed from bin Laden's life, yet he seized on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as justification for killing Americans wherever he could.

Perhaps his outrage was a result of his sense of brotherhood with all Muslims. For example, he said, "All of us are like a body. If any part of the body has pain, the other parts also feel it" (Scheuer, 2002, p. 65). There are, however, multiple reasons for doubting this. First, in 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed to establish peace between Israelis and Palestinians, bin Laden was outraged (Miller, 2015). Despite his claim of universal Muslim connectedness, bin Laden would rather risk further Palestinian lives than have peace.

Second, bin Laden focused exclusively on Muslim lives lost to non-Muslims, but ignored massive losses when the killers were Muslims. The Algerian civil war caused over 100,000 casualties (Wright, 2006, p. 190). In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's massacre of Kurds resulted in an estimated 50,000 to 182,000 deaths (Kurdistan Regional Government, n.d.). In Somalia, in 1992, the combination of civil war and famine left 350,000 people dead (Hogg, 2008). The war between Iraq and Iran was far worse, with over 1.5 million Iranian deaths and 160,000 to 240,000 Iraqis killed (Lawrence, 2005, p. 223, Note 7).

If bin Laden was motivated by concern for fellow Muslims, why did he not address these enormities? With his wealth, connections, and international visibility, he could have become an outspoken advocate for peace. He chose not to. He focused on Palestinian deaths at the hands of Israel, but showed no concern for millions of Muslims slaughtered by other Muslims. The former served his political purpose; the latter did not.

Third, bin Laden viewed Muslims in the wrong place at the wrong time as expendable (Anonymous/Scheur, 2002, p. 65). For example, though hundreds of Muslims were killed in the attacks on 9/11 (Lawrence, 2005, p. 140), bin Laden expressed no regret or empathy for them or their families. Finally, the most damaging blow to bin Laden's stated concern on behalf of fellow Muslims is the extent to which he viewed many Muslims as enemies and had many killed in terrorist attacks:

> Of twenty-six attacks by al-Qa'ida from 1995 to 2003, 88 per cent were in Muslim-majority countries, the vast majority of whose victims were non-Westerners… In Iraq alone, more than one thousand people were being killed every month in Al-Qa'ida attacks by the spring of 2008 (Wright, 2015, pp. 364–365).

According to Miller, "Arabs and Muslims [were] fast in becoming al-Qa'ida's primary victims" (2015, p. 4). Based on this information, it is hard to accept bin Laden's claim of universal Muslim brotherhood as justification for his concern about Palestinians. Rather, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provided justification for his pre-existent rage and hatred.

Behind bin Laden's Political Claims

If bin Laden's complaints about American troops in Saudi Arabia and American support for Israel against the Palestinians had no validity, what was driving his hostility? Bin Laden cited vicarious and fictional victimisations, and conjured paranoid conspiracies on the part of America and Israel.

Whereas his claim of empathy with Palestinians was an example of geographically distant vicarious victimisations, bin Laden also engaged in temporally distant vicarious victimisations. For example, he routinely referred to Americans/Christians as Crusaders (Bergen, 2001; Lawrence, 2005; El-Ansary, 2009; Miller, 2015), invoking centuries-old victimisations. He also repeatedly cited the end of the Ottoman Empire as a source of his hostility (Bergen, 2006, p. 317; Lawrence, 2005, p. 104; 135–136). In addition, bin Laden cited the creation of Israel as yet another historical vicarious victimisation (Lawrence, 2005, p. 162).

In addition to his claims of vicarious victimisations, bin Laden expressed unfounded hostility toward the West:

> Every Muslim … from the moment they realize the distinction in their hearts, hates Americans, hates Jews, and hates Christians. This is a part of our belief and our religion. For as long as I can remember, I have felt tormented and at war, and have felt hatred and animosity for Americans (Coll, 2008, p. 204).

Based on this passage, it appears that bin Laden's hatred came first – he later found rationales to justify his animosity. To quote Fredholm again, ideology was "more of an after-the-fact justification for terrorism than a before-the-fact motivating factor" (2016, p. 109).

Of course, the statement that all Muslims hate Jews, Christians, and Americans is absurd and makes a mockery of tradi-

tional Islamic values and teachings (Dakake, 2009; El-Ansary, 2009; El Fadl, 2005; Shah-Kazemi, 2009).

Bin Laden also concocted conspiracies and victimisations that had no connection to reality:

- He claimed that Jews and Christians in Muslim lands were "raping our sisters and brothers" and that in Jerusalem Jews were free to "rape weak Muslim women" (Bergen, 2006, pp. 242, 291).
- He claimed that America sought to enslave Muslims (Sasson, 2012, p. 219).
- He believed that "the oppression and intentional murder of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy" (Coll, 2008, p. 258).
- He claimed that when America promoted peace in the Middle East, "The peace that they foist on Muslims in order to ready and prepare them to be slaughtered" (Coll, 2008, p. 533).
- Despite the fact that Sunni and Shia Muslims had a history of conflict for centuries, bin Laden said, "For twenty years now, the fight has been raging between Shi'as and Sunnis. This fight is directed by the government itself in compliance with orders from the America" (Miller, 2015, p. 310).
- According to bin Laden, "the whole Muslim world is the victim of international terrorism, engineered by America at the United Nations" (El-Ansary, 2009, p. 217).
- Bin Laden, like Hitler, viewed Jews as having power and control over other peoples, including Americans: "the American people themselves are the slaves of the Jews and are forced to live according to the principles and laws laid down by them" (Scheuer, 2011, p. 140).
- Bin Laden claimed that "Jewish Israeli forces will thus seize the opportunity to secure a foothold and advance into what remains of Muslim lands, including the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries [Saudi Arabia]" (Miller, 2015, p. 185).
- Like Hitler and other white supremacists, bin Laden believed that Jews controlled stock markets and banks (Anonymous/Scheuer, 2002, p. 35). In fact, bin Laden said to America, "the Jews have taken control of your economy, through which they have then taken control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life making you their servants and achieving their aims at your expense" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 167).
- Bin Laden believed the myth of Jewish power, stating, "We speak of the American government, but it is in reality an Israeli government, because if we look into the most sensitive departments of the government, whether it is the Pentagon or the State Department or the CIA, you find that it is the Jews who have the first word inside the American government. Consequently they use America to execute their plans throughout the world" (Bergen, 2006, p. 291).

What is perhaps most striking about bin Laden's claims is the extent to which he saw the international Muslim community – a community of 1.5 billion people who constituted the majority in dozens of countries – as a community that was on the brink of extinction. In this regard, his rhetoric resembled that of Hitler and subsequent white supremacist perpetrators who viewed Aryans as facing annihilation. Bin Laden made numerous claims to this effect:

- "We should therefore see events not as isolated incidents, but as part of a long chain of conspiracies, a war of annihilation in all senses of the word" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 137).
- "After the end of the Cold War, America escalated its campaign against the Muslim world in its entirety, aiming to get rid of Islam itself" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 39)
- "1200 million Muslims are being slaughtered without anyone even knowing" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 153)

The belief that 1.2 billion Muslims were being slaughtered was completely disconnected from reality. Similarly, bin Laden stated, "The disbelievers – Crusaders and others – have laid plans to destroy and turn off this great light … Very few Islamic lands remain … Only you are left!" (Miller, 2015, pp. 153–155). Again, the idea that "very few Islamic lands remain" had no foundation in reality. Bin Laden seemed obsessed with conjuring a bizarre vision of staggering victimisation:

> The dismemberment of Muslims has spread across the earth, their blood on every patch of land and field. The earth has exploded into flame from the sheer quantity of killing and slaughtering on it. So much so that if the earth defecated, it would find itself constipated from the bulk of blood and body parts (Miller, 2015, p. 130).

Bin Laden sought to portray Muslims as the ultimate victims of the world, and thereby focused only on this aspect of history. He ignored the history of invasion and violence perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in Europe and elsewhere, as well as Muslim violence against Christians and Jews in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Gilbert, 2010; Jenkins, 2008). In his view, Muslims were everywhere and always the victims of the world. This fictional belief justified his use of violence.

One more point is worth noting. Though bin Laden framed his hatred in an Islamic context, his attacks were unacceptable within mainstream interpretations of Islam. Though Islam is a complex religion with multiple strands, numerous Muslim scholars, and even fellow jihadists and members of al-Qaeda, objected to bin Laden's actions (Langman, 2021).

According to El Fadl (2005), Islam prohibits killing women, children, the elderly, and civilians in general. Shah-Kazemi said, "terror attacks are totally devoid of any legitimacy in terms of Islamic law and morality" (2009, p. 120). According to Dakake, "The notion of a militant Islam cannot be supported by any educated reading of the source materials" (2009, p. 28). El Fadl stated that the core aspects of Islam are "mercy, compassion, and peace. After all, these are the values that each practicing Muslim affirms in prayer at least five times a day" (2005, p. 11).

Thus, terrorism violates everything for which Islam stands. As stated by Shah-Kazemi, "There is nothing in Islam that justifies the killing or injuring of civilians, nor of perpetrating

any excess as a result of hatred, even if that hatred is based on legitimate grievances" (2009, p. 130). This further supports the notion that ideology is a convenient excuse, not a cause, of violence.

This discussion of bin Laden began with his complaints about U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and American support for Israel – complaints that at first glance seem to be grounded and rational. Even a brief investigation, however, showed that these complaints do not hold up to scrutiny. Behind bin Laden's public justifications lay numerous vicarious and fictional victimisations, as well as fictional, paranoid beliefs. The available evidence suggests that he had traits of several personality disorders, including paranoid, antisocial, narcissistic, and sadistic (Langman, 2021).

DISCUSSION

This article has explored the concept of irrational rationales through a variety of perpetrators of different types of ideological violence. These include government-sponsored violence (Hitler), the leader of an international terrorist organisation (bin Laden), and lone attackers with ideologies directed against divergent targets.

As noted at the beginning of this article, behind the public claims of justifications, ideological killers have complex inner dynamics driving them to violence. Raphael Ezekiel summed up the mindset of a white supremacist by saying, "He believes the ideology literally, word for word – there is an Enemy, the Enemy is evil. He believes the ideology because he wants it: He wants the grounds for radical action" (1995, p. xxxi). Or in the words of Post, the ideology is "a conclusion in search of evidence" (1998, p. 26). The evidence may be found by citing vicarious victimisations or fabricating fictional beliefs. Recognizing the different categories of motivations discussed in this article can have significant ramifications for our understanding of ideological violence.

Mental Health Issues

The ongoing debate regarding the extent of mental health issues among terrorists has been enriched by addressing the difference between lone-actors and group-affiliated perpetrators (Corner & Gill, 2014). This discussion can be further developed by exploring mental health issues across perpetrators with grounded, vicarious, and fictional motivations. Does Post's statement that "the cause is not the cause" apply in all cases, or is it most relevant when perpetrators are driven by vicarious and/or fictional justifications?

Also, though fictional justifications have been referred to here as paranoid beliefs, some of them may warrant being identified as paranoid delusions. Defining when a false belief becomes a delusion is difficult, but this issue has important diagnostic implications for our understanding of the underlying issues driving people to commit violence. For example, paranoia can be psychotic (paranoid delusions) as seen in schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, or non-psychotic (paranoid thoughts), as seen in various personality disorders (paranoid, schizotypal, borderline). This distinction matters in terms of intervention and treatment for people on the path of extremist violence. Further research into the range of paranoia exhibited by perpetrators with fictional justifications is necessary.

Radicalisation

In addition, our understanding of radicalisation may be enhanced by examining the process across perpetrators who use grounded vs. irrational rationales. Being radicalised to a real and present cause may be dramatically different than being radicalised to a geographically or temporally remote cause, or one that only exists in the minds of extremists.

For example, researchers have identified numerous social factors that can influence radicalisation (Feddes et al., 2020; Horgan, 2008; Spaaij, 2012). These include not only oppression or victimisations, but positive factors such as belongingness, camaraderie, prestige, family pride, and meeting role models for violence. Do such influences exist in cases of vicarious or fictional justifications in the same way they do for perpetrators with grounded motivations built upon current political realities? In addition, how is it that someone can be radicalised to commit mass murder to defend his people from a threat that does not exist? We need to better understand this process.

Counterterrorism

Finally, if perpetrators with grounded vs. irrational rationales differ, and/or if the process of radicalisation across the categories differs, this has implications for counterterrorism efforts. Recognizing the existence of irrational rationales and the psychological dynamics behind them may direct efforts to keep people from becoming radicalised, as well as assist in developing strategies for getting them off the path of violent extremism. Such strategies may be significantly different for people living under oppressive regimes vs. those who are paranoid and perceive existential threats where they do not exist, or are lost souls seeking belonging, a purpose, and an outlet for their anger.

At the micro level of individuals, understanding the psychological dynamics involved in extremism can assist mental health professionals working with clients who may be on the path of ideological violence. At the macro level of national and international politics, the distinction between grounded and irrational rationales has significant implications. For example, to the extent that anti-American or anti-Western jihadists are driven by actual government actions in the Middle East or elsewhere, reducing Muslim hostility necessitates a re-evaluation of policies and actions. To whatever extent jihadists are driven by vicarious and/or fictional justifications, however, this is a matter of battling misinformation, bigotry, and anti-American

or anti-Western propaganda, as well as addressing any social conditions that may contribute to discontentment and rage. If it is difficult to conceive that al-Qaeda and other jihadist organisations are not driven by political realities but irrational rationales, we need to remember that the Holocaust was based on fictional beliefs that resulted in an unprecedented massacre of innocent people across the European continent.

LIMITATIONS

It must be noted that we only know what the perpetrators said or wrote, not what they believed. It is possible that they made statements that they did not believe. Because of the consistency of their statements and commitment to their ideologies, their words have been taken at face value.

In addition, not only do the perpetrators discussed in this article constitute a small sample, but there was not space to engage in detailed analyses of each of them. They are all complex individuals who cannot be properly understood without lengthy discussions of their lives, personalities, social stressors, and other factors. For more in-depth analyses of several of the perpetrators discussed here, see Langman (2019a; 2019b; 2021).

CONCLUSION

The frequency of mass attacks that are justified by non-existent causes or victimisations that have no connection to the perpetrators highlights the need for more research into this phenomenon. All too often, people are killed under the guise of irrational rationales. To effectively address this phenomenon, we need to see past public statements of blame and justification to the underlying dynamics that are driving people to commit mass attacks.

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