

Lone Wolf Killers: A Perspective on Overvalued Ideas

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We have just recently witnessed an event in my backyard (Ottawa, Ontario) that is being heralded as a terrorist act and even an ISIS attack on the Canadian Military. The perpetrator (Zehaf-Bibeau) had converted to Islam and was recently frustrated in his attempt to get a passport to travel to Iraq, Libya and Syria. At 0950 on Wednesday October 22, 2014 the perpetrator shot and killed Cpl. Nathan Cirillo as the Canadian Military Reservist guarded the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier here in our nation's capital. He fired a shot at a second reservist and then ran into our Parliament Building with a 30-30 rifle and exchanged fire with RCMP officers before being shot by an experienced police officer and a former colleague of mine, Kevin Vickers who was the Sergeant at Arms for Parliament.

The perpetrator was born into a wealthy family but at the time of this event was a homeless man with a criminal record for violence, drugs and robbery. Although at this point there are still many unanswered questions, I cannot help but think that this attack is yet another that fits within a category seldom discussed by professionals, including law enforcement. It is an act committed by a young man with Overvalued Ideas.

An overvalued idea is "an unreasonable and sustained belief that is maintained with less than delusional intensity" (DSM IV). These persons have idealised values, which have developed into such an over-riding importance that they totally define the 'self' or identity of the individual. It is an unreasonable belief over which the person has become obsessed to the extent that he/she is unable to adapt to different circumstances. Although they can remain functional, they have a high degree of affect (e.g. anxiety or anger) when there is a threat to the loss of their goal or object of the belief and may take action they believe is justified.

Overvalued ideas are not delusions. They are in the middle of a continuum of obsessional doubts to delusional certainty. People with overvalued ideas are not completely and irrationally fixed in their beliefs. However, rigidity of belief makes it more resistant to any treatment and able to ignore the consequences of acting on their value. As a result, they are more likely to commit violence than person with delusions.

Lone Wolf may be a misnomer as this type of killer is not always alone (i.e. McVeigh/Nichols) and in the future I believe we will see more "packs" of these wolves as they unite on common beliefs and themes.

We are all by now aware that killers do not fit into any nice neat categories; however, there can be similar characteristics displayed in parallel cases that are not only evident in the rear view mirror but can

be noticed pre-event by threat evaluation experts. I like to look at the “motivating mindset” and the “psychopathology” when commencing an evaluation into the likelihood of targeted violence. The motivating mindset is simply answering the question “what need is being fulfilled by taking this action”? The psychopathology is often a personality disorder, a cluster of personality disorders and/or a mental disorder but sometimes as we see here in this perspective, it is something different.

Over the past few years we have seen a number of killers that fit into this category. Many of these subjects made attempts to affiliate themselves with known extremist groups such as radical anti-abortion groups, white supremacist and neo Nazi groups. Although this genre of subject sees themselves as rebels for a cause or warriors, their actions are more a result of their psychopathology and motivating mindset. Some have psychopathic and paranoid traits, some have schizoid or narcissistic personality disorder but all have overvalued ideas. They can be recognized as people who don't fit into society well and are even misfits within radical organizations.

I expect we will continue to see this type of individual emerge with radical political and terrorist groups who beckon them to do their “dirty work”. We may see more of this violence within this group of individuals who espouse militant action for animal rights and the environment. It should be understood that it is really not “the cause” that moves them to violence; it is the overvalued idea brought about by psychopathology. Finally, overvalued ideas do not constitute mental illness and should not be considered by the courts as a reason for “diminished responsibility” or “not guilty by reason of insanity or mental disorder.

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