

# Hate Crime Perpetrators: The Psychopath & The Perseverator

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“There is no delusional idea held by the mentally ill which cannot be exceeded in its absurdity by the conviction of fanatics, either individually or en masse”...Hoche

The FBI has defined a hate crime as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”

The FBI’s annual Hate Crime Statistics (2015) report shows a 53 percent increase in the number of multiple-bias hate crime incidents when compared to the year before. 59.2 % of the victims were targeted because of the offenders’ bias against race; 19.7 % were victimized because of bias against religion; 17.7 % were targeted because of bias against sexual orientation. Fifty-four million Americans with disabilities experience serious violence at a rate nearly three times that of the general population. Since November 2009, the federal hate crime law also protects individuals who are victimized because of a physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disability (FBI, 2015).

Hate as an emotion is not a crime but when it crosses the line into criminal acts against person and property it must be dealt with as a hate crime. I have chosen 2 key words in reporting the statistics above; these words are “targeted” and “bias”. The word “targeted” implies an instrumental act that is goal directed and selective toward an individual or group. Hate Crime is a predatory crime in that the offender preys on selected victims for the purpose of satiating his/her needs. The word “bias” denotes the offenders’ bias against the selected individual or group. It is crucial that we understand the offenders’ bias as his/her cognitive distortion which becomes the causal component of the hate crime. We cannot entertain the distinctiveness of the victim to in any way rationalize or justify the hate crime. Hate crimes are not a product of inter-group conflict; they are the result of the offenders’ action chosen by the distorted way they see themselves in the world. It is from this premise that we can view the most common profiles of the hate crime perpetrators.

When searching for categories of perpetrators there is often no typology that accurately covers all offenders and equally there is considerable overlap in personal characteristics. Usually a combination of psychopathology and motivating mindset illuminates characteristics that can help us identify two or more profiles of offenders in a crime category. The two criminally violent types that are often seen in hate crimes are the Psychopath and the Perseverator. The Psychopath is a known entity with a large body of research that allows us considerable knowledge of the motivating mindset behind their violent crimes. The Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) is the gold standard in understanding the cluster of characteristics that make up the psychopathic personality. Less known is an individual who has overvalued ideas; an individual that I refer to as the Perseverator. I choose that name because it

describes an individual who has chosen an idea or set of ideas and has become rigidly attached to these themes to which he/she 'perseverates' on them incessantly.

### **Psychopath**

**Thrill seeking and predatory individual with a callous lack of concern for others.**

**Some of the key features seen in people with psychopathic personality are:**

Need for Stimulation

Lack of Empathy

Inability to feel Remorse

Predatory attraction to vulnerability

Need for Power & Control

Poor Behavioural Controls

### **Why is this person involved in Hate Crimes?**

Hate Crimes committed for the thrill of it. Victims are vulnerable simply because their sexual, racial, ethnic, gender or religious backgrounds differ from that of their attackers

70% of these "thrill offenses" were assaults

Victims "don't belong here" in my space

Sense of superiority

Need for power over another person

May feel justified as victims are seen to be "colouring outside the lines of societal norms"

Victims targeting for perceived wrongs (i.e. Muslims killing Americans)

Subjects may join hate groups to exhibit their strength

No hesitation or sober thought about inflicting pain or damaging property

Sadistic enjoyment

## **Perseverator**

**The ultra fanatic who is obsessed with an ideology and is seen as a misfit even within groups of other fanatics.**

**Some of the key features seen in people with overvalued ideas are:**

Idealised values which have developed into such an over-riding importance that they totally define the 'self' or identity of the individual

Continuing to persevere on a theme past the point where a reasonable person is likely to stop

Not being able to move on from feeling angry and distressed about an event which has passed or no longer a threat

Constantly talking or obsessing about something that happened weeks/months/years ago

Unable to adapt to different circumstances and ignore the consequences of acting on these over-valued ideas

Rigidity of belief makes them more resistant to any intervention or treatment

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

Identification with other attackers or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system.

The belief is often relished, amplified, and defended with intense emotional commitment and may result in violent behavior

## **Why is this person involved in Hate Crimes?**

Over-valued ideas are associated with idealised values, which have developed into such an over-riding importance, that they totally define the 'self' or identity of the individual. Idealised values are also characterised by the rigidity with which they are held. Such patients are unable to adapt to different circumstances and ignore the consequences of acting on their value. Carl Wernicke (1848–1905), a German neuropsychiatrist, proposed the concept of “überwertige Idee” (overvalued idea) in 1900. The DSM-5 definition states that it is “an unreasonable and sustained belief that is maintained with less than delusional intensity (i.e., the person is able to acknowledge the possibility that the belief may not be true). The belief is not one that is ordinarily accepted by the other members of the person's culture or subculture” (APA, 2013, p. 826). The British definitions are quite different. The Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry states that it is “an isolated, preoccupying belief neither delusional, nor obsessional in nature, which comes to dominate a person's life for years and may affect his actions” (Gelder et al, p. 267).

Overvalued ideas are also described in literature pertaining to anorexia nervosa, where the desire to be slim is the result of beliefs that are shared by others in society (that slimness is desirable). However, these individuals have extreme beliefs that fulminate and dominate their minds to the point of starvation. A highly abnormal religious belief could sometimes be regarded as an overvalued idea. For example, an individual desecrates or burns a mosque because it represents a radical form of Islam. Have you ever been in conversation with someone who continually steers the discussion back to a particular strongly held belief? The individual has a reputation for “playing a one string banjo” and does not seem to be aware of how the intensity affects others. This person may be written off as a fanatic but when the subject matter is divisive, inflammatory, and spurious in the attack of others, then there may be an “overvalued idea” present. The concern begins when one overvalues an idea or belief to such an extreme that it becomes the singular focus of life and is defended with irrational intensity often resulting in violence.

With the increasing prevalence of instrumental violent behavior, erupting from people who have these features, a better understanding and definition of non-delusional but rigidly held beliefs is critical. Expanding upon the notion of “overvalued ideas” by citing examples may assist in providing recognition of this phenomenon that can lead to violence.

The 2011 case of Anders Breivik, the man responsible for the bombing and shooting deaths of 77 mostly young people in and near Oslo, Norway is a devastating example of this phenomenon. Breivik's rigidly espoused beliefs were ultimately thought to be the source of his extreme violence. Similar rigidly espoused beliefs resulting in violence have been seen in Islamic, anti-abortionist, and pro-environmental terrorism. This description of perseverating on a theme or belief appears to be an accurate portrayal of the right-wing, anti-Muslim extremist views of Breivik, who boastfully asserted that he was a knight dedicated to stemming the tide of Muslim immigration into Europe. The court concluded that Breivik's grandiose beliefs were not bizarre or delusional, noting that the evaluators who opined that he was not criminally responsible should have consulted experts on right-wing ideologies.

Upon reviewing the Breivik case I was pleased to see that Tahir Rahman, Phillip J. Resnick and Bruce Harry had recently proposed a definition of extreme overvalued belief, which conveys this important concept of rigidly held non-delusional beliefs. They proffer this definition based on a review of Wernicke (1900), McHugh & Slavney (1998), and DSM-5 (2013):

“An extreme overvalued belief is one that is shared by others in a person's cultural, religious, or subcultural group. The belief is often relished, amplified, and defended by the possessor of the belief and should be differentiated from a delusion or obsession. The idea fulminates in the mind of the individual, growing more dominant over time, more refined, and more resistant to challenge. The individual has an intense emotional commitment to the belief and may carry out violent behavior in its service. It is usually associated with an abnormal personality” (Rahman et al, 2016. P.34).

White supremacy remains one of the chief inspirations of the Perseverators. Dylann Roof's 2015 massacre of nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, S.C. is an example of a person with overvalued ideas. His website and manifesto reflected the same message which he clearly stated in his

confession to FBI agents when asked why he did the shooting: “Somebody had to do something because, you know, black people are killing white people every day on the street, and they’re raping white women”. Finally he utters a message common to perseverators who are seen as too extreme for mainstream hate groups: “We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet...I had to do it because no one else is brave enough to do anything about it.” He rejected any mention of a mental disorder and regarded himself as a “sociopath rather than autistic”. Roof was found guilty of 33 Hate Crimes and on January 11, 2017 was sentenced to death.

It should be understood that it is really not “the cause or the victim” that moves them to violence; it is the overvalued idea brought about by cognitive distortion and psychopathology. Finally, overvalued ideas and psychopathic personality 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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