

CASE REPORT

J. Reid Meloy,¹ Ph.D.

Erotomania, Triangulation, and Homicide

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ABSTRACT: A case of homicide by a 29-year-old male with erotomanic delusional disorder and various personality disorders is reported. Following a month of pursuit of a female stranger with whom he had briefly conversed in a local bar, he assaulted an automotive plant where she worked, delusionally believing that she was at imminent risk and needed to be rescued. One plant manager was killed and two police officers were wounded. The case illustrates the phenomenon of triangulation, where rage toward the rejecting object is displaced onto a third party, which is then perceived as impeding access to the victim and may be at risk for violent assault.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, forensic psychiatry, forensic psychology, erotomania, homicide, delusions, violence, psychosis, mental disorder, stalking

The delusional belief that one is loved by another is the defining characteristic of a psychiatric disorder clinically described by French, German, and British doctors in 1921 (1–3). It seems ethnocentrically appropriate, moreover, that the French psychiatrist Gatan de Clérambault would have only his appellation associated with this disorder of passion, an syndrome passionnel morbide, or unrequited love (4).

Delusional disorder, erotomanic subtype is quite new to American psychiatry, however, first appearing as one of the delusional (paranoid) disorders in DSM-III-R (5) a little over a decade ago. Delusional disorder has a prevalence rate of approximately 3:10 000 in the general population, and is a rare disorder even in psychiatric samples, representing only 1 to 2% of inpatient admissions (6). Males are more likely to have the erotomanic subtype in forensic settings; females predominate in civil settings.

Although most individuals with this disorder are not violent, there is an emerging literature that defines risk among this psychiatric population. Approximately 10% of individuals who stalk have a primary diagnosis of erotomania, and rates of violence among stalkers average 25 to 35% (7). Homicide rates among stalkers appear to be less than 2% (7). Menzies et al. (8) conducted the first predictive study of violence among erotomanic males, and found that two variables—serious antisocial behavior (a criminal history) unrelated to the delusion and concurrent, multiple objects of fixation—discriminated between the dangerous and nondangerous men. Meloy (7) found in a review of ten studies of obsessional

followers ($n = 180$) that if violence occurred, the target was the object of ‘love’ at least 80% of the time. The next most likely target was a third party perceived as impeding access to the object. He referred to this latter behavioral phenomenon as *triangulation*, and has developed a psychodynamic explanation for its occurrence (9). The following case illustrates this pattern of violence.

Instant Offense

Mr. A, a 29-year-old Caucasian male, left his apartment at 0545 on a Thursday morning in November. The young man was high school educated, employed at the time as a glass cutter, and had never married. He believed in his mind that he might be the biological father of his ex-girlfriend’s ten-year-old son, but during the past month she had refused to even consider this possibility, and had filed a harassment complaint against him. He had also threatened over the past year and a half to kill his sister’s husband and his own mother, which had predictably resulted in their separate decisions to not have any contact with him. He was without personal moorings, feeling alone, rejected, and angry.

This was a Presidential election year, and Bill Clinton had just been returned to office. Mr. A believed the government was generally corrupt, was very anti-business, and opposed anyone whom he believed infringed on the citizen’s right to bear arms or express any other freedoms outlined in the Bill of Rights. He was an advocate of the militia movements, and had contacted, but never actually joined or attended, any militia meetings.

But Mr. A had a mission in mind this morning. Over the past month he had frequented a local bar where he had met a woman named Debra. She worked at a local automotive assembly plant, and he had had several conversations with her. He believed that she loved him and they were meant to marry. The facts of their encounters, however, did not support his beliefs. He had been in the bar no more than five times, and had several very brief conversations with Debra. The first two involved her persuading him to leave to avoid further trouble, and the last verbal exchange, approximately two weeks before this morning, consisted of her accusation that he might be stalking her, her threat to get a restraining order, and his asking when he could see her again. Since this last encounter, he had inquired about her ring size, purchased a \$600 wedding ring for her, and had gone to the bar ‘‘dressed up’’ one evening to propose to her. She wasn’t there.

His own interpretation of her rejections, however, was quite idiosyncratic, consistent with his private, internal world of erotomanic delusion. He believed that she was, instead, protecting him from something—‘‘like she was trying to avoid me to protect me from something and I wasn’t sure what that was’’ (police interrogation)—and that she was also at imminent risk of being harmed or

¹ Department of Psychiatry, University of California-San Diego, San Diego, CA 92101.

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killed, along with his family. "I was going to break her out of prison" (police interrogation). He also had been listening carefully to the television, and believed that certain dialogue from the X-Files,² Spiderman, and Tales from the Crypt was advising him to assault the automotive plant where she worked and rescue her. He was generally paranoid, believing that someone was following and surveilling him. His sleep pattern was disturbed, he had been consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, but had not used any stimulants. The day before the planned assault Mr. A visited the automotive plant at 0400. He gathered political pamphlets that he believed were threatening the plant's employees, and also inquired as to the whereabouts of Debra. The one employee he spoke to thought his questions were odd, but was not afraid of him.

Mr. A was prepared for his mission. As he later told the police, "It was definitely to prove to her that I loved her and would not let anybody come between me and her. I would not let anybody ever, ever infringe on her rights. I will not let that happen" (police interrogation). He dressed himself out in camouflage battle fatigues—he had served for three years in the Army—and carried an American Eagle AR 15 with flash suppressor and scope, and over 300 rounds of .223 caliber armor-piercing, incendiary, and tracer ammunition. He also had survival gear packed in a duffel bag, which included a smoke grenade, bayonet, web gear, ammo pouches, water, poncho, canteens, pliers, a gas mask, food, and an American flag to give to Debra.

Mr. A began to walk to the automotive plant 0.75 miles from his apartment. He became disoriented in a large wooded area, entered a parking lot, and stole a pickup truck to get closer to his objective. He hid his duffel bag behind a gym along the way. When Mr. A arrived at Entrance Gate No. 3, he fired multiple rounds into the security station, shots that were initially mistaken by some employees—there were 1500 on shift at the time—as mechanical sounds from someone working on the roof. As he reloaded and entered the plant grounds—"people were running and looking at me"—he turned and saw a manager behind him dressed in a shirt and tie, and carrying a walkie-talkie. He targeted him. "He was management. . . he happened to be one of the unfortunate ones that caught my bullets. . . he was marking me for the police. . . he was a forward observer" (police interrogation).

Mr. A chased and hunted his victim, a 57-year-old husband and father of three. He intentionally bounced multiple rounds under a vehicle behind which the victim was hiding, hitting him five times in his ankle, legs, and thigh as he hobbled further into the plant. Eventually Mr. A located the victim hiding under a desk in an office, and shot him to death, firing three more rounds into his right lower back, right elbow, and right chest, the latter bullet transecting the aorta, the esophagus, and perforating the left ventricle and atrium of his heart. All wound paths were back to front. The cause of death was multiple gunshot wounds. Mr. A continued to walk through the plant, exchanging gunfire with four police officers, attempting to kill another manager, conversing with several employees who were not management, and eventually exiting the back of the building, 200 yards from other employees who were fleeing the area. His "mission accomplished." Mr. A's thoughts shifted to another goal: "to escape the building. . . there were people running around, scattered, didn't know where to go. Some of them were kind of nervous about me wielding a weapon, and some

of them weren't really scared at all. . . some of them knew the deal and they wished they had enough guts to do it themselves. . ." (police interrogation).

Mr. A changed directions, exited another building, and once outside, descended into the drainage system of the complex. He remained there for at least four hours, traversing at times 100 yards underground, firing multiple rounds at police and news helicopters, and eventually surfacing and surrendering to the police. "I was in water, I was wet, and it was getting colder. As far as I was concerned my mission was completed. . . I thought there'd be a bullet in the back of my head as soon as I came out of the end of the pipe. . . they treated me with the utmost respect" (police interrogation).

Mr. A was charged with 26 felony counts, including one count of first-degree murder and nine counts of assault with intent to commit murder. One victim was dead and two police officers were wounded. Mr. A pled not guilty by reason of insanity.

Forensic Evaluations and Clinical Treatment

Mr. A was evaluated by two psychiatrists, five psychologists, and one social worker over the course of 15 months subsequent to the crimes. He was variously diagnosed on Axis I with schizophrenia, paranoid type; delusional disorder, erotomanic type; psychotic disorder NOS; alcohol abuse; schizophreniform disorder; and dysthymic disorder (6). Axis II diagnoses included borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and personality disorder NOS (6). Psychological testing produced three invalid MMPI-2 protocols and one valid MCMI-II, which confirmed the Axis II clinical diagnoses. Although he was initially found incompetent to stand trial due to his delusions and hospitalized, the four examiners who evaluated his sanity did not believe he was insane at the time of the crime.³ Treatment was quite successful with the use of an antidepressant (sertraline) and an antipsychotic (olanzapine) combination. He was no longer delusional at the time of his trial.

Mr. A was the second child of a middle-class, married couple. He had no birth complications and passed his developmental milestones at a normal age. His parents described him as bright, verbal, overly attached to his mother, and antagonistic toward peers and adult authority figures—he was the neighborhood bully. A clear pattern of conduct disorder emerged by early adolescence. Mr. A would be defiant and unruly in school, not responsive to discipline in the home, reckless, and rambunctious. He vandalized property and shoplifted, physically fought other students, was truant from age 12 onward, and was suspended from school five times. He also stole automobiles and developed a fascination with weapons, discharging firearms in his own home. His criminal history as an adolescent included breaking and entering, poaching, and random shooting at automobiles.

Mr. A's chemical use included alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, methaqualone, LSD, and mescaline. He was psychiatrically hospitalized for violence toward his parents at age 15, and discharged to a juvenile treatment center with DSM-III diagnoses of dysthymic disorder and oppositional disorder after he barricaded himself at the hospital (10). He eventually served three years in the military.

³ Three of the examiners did not find sufficient evidence to opine that he was delusional; the fourth examiner, although he believed Mr. A was delusional, did not believe "there was a clear causal relationship between the one element of mental illness found, delusional erotomania, and the actual murder," thus negating the further application of the modified McNaughten standards for insanity in this particular state.

² A month after this case was tried, the "X-Files" aired an episode entitled "folie au deux" (No. 5X19) on 10 May 1998 which involved a workplace homicide and an ostensibly paranoid delusional perpetrator who believed management were aliens. They were.

As one man described him after the homicidal assault, “he hated the police department and the government. . .he had that Rambo thing in his head. . .he thought he was the man. . .he’d always say they’d never take me alive.”

Mr. A’s emotional instability, however, was most apparent with women. Beginning with an intensely hostile and dependent relationship toward his mother, there were at least three incidents in adulthood of harassing and stalking women who did not solicit, nor want, his attention. As one of the evaluating psychologists wrote, “he gets extremely attached to (women) for unsound or unrealistic reasons, then feels betrayed and abused. There appears to be a consistent pattern of making more out of relationships than reality would dictate, forming quick, needy interpersonal attachments and then experiencing abject abandonment when the woman pushes him away. He evidences attachment pathology and instability of mood, often leading to angry outbursts and sometimes physical explosiveness.” After a three-week trial, Mr. A was convicted of first-degree murder and numerous other felony counts. He was also found sane. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Discussion

This was a case of predatory violence (11) motivated by paranoid delusion. Fortunately it did not become a mass murder (12). Mr. A evidenced several Cluster B personality disorders, and as Morey (13) noted, when one personality disorder is diagnosed, it is more likely than not that another personality disorder can also be diagnosed. Although there was no direct assessment of his degree of psychopathy (14), the fact that he met threshold criteria for antisocial personality disorder would substantially increase his risk of violent behavior sometime in adulthood. This enduring pattern of hostile and aggressive interactions with others throughout his life, when coupled with his extensive training in the military and fascination with weapons, would increase his *lethality risk* if he did act out violently.

Even though these crimes occurred in a workplace, it would be misleading to label them as just another example of workplace violence. The fact of the matter is that Mr. A had no reality-based relationship to the automotive assembly plant or its workers. He was not an employee bent on retaliation for perceived mistreatment; he was not an angry and estranged sex partner of an employee; and he was not committing a robbery—three of the most common motivational patterns for workplace violence. His homicidal act was, instead, a product of paranoid delusion and triangulation.

Triangulation in erotomanic delusion is the belief on the part of the perpetrator that a third party is impeding access to the love object. It may be based in reality, such as the victim’s actual spouse, attorney, or police officers confronting the erotomanic’s behavior; or it may be psychotic, such as the case of Mr. A. In both situations it may increase the risk of violent acting out. Triangulation is also present in jealousy, whether morbid (delusional) or not, but is motivated instead by a perceived *competition* for the love object.

The psychodynamic understanding of triangulation is complex, and is grounded in two components when erotomania is present: first, the role the defense of projection (and thus paranoia) plays in the disorder; and second, the narcissistic psychopathology—illustrated in Mr. A’s personality disorder diagnosis—common among erotomanics (15), usually evident in their hubris, martyrdom, or simple poignancy. Erotomanic individuals projectively attribute the impulse to love onto the object, and experience

it as coming from within the object. They are exquisitely sensitive to rejection, however, when it occurs, defending against their consequent feelings of humiliation with rage and a desire to damage or utterly devalue the object of pursuit (16). This diminishes envy for that which cannot be possessed (17), and may satisfy certain primitive talionic impulses (an eye for an eye). The actual destruction of the rejecting object may also restore the delusional and idealized narcissistic linking fantasy to the object (16)—for instance, a conscious belief that they are destined to be together in a perfect, usually nonerotic union.

In triangulation, however, the psychodynamic process has an added step. In order to protect the delusional and narcissistic link to the object—in Mr. A’s mind, the absolute certainty that a stranger female loved him—the rage felt in the midst of rejection is *displaced* and projected onto a third party. Now an otherwise neutral person or group poses an imminent risk to the object of pursuit, and sometimes to the erotomanic himself. A paranoid pseudocommunity (18) is created in the mind of the perpetrator, and thoughts turn to fantasies of rescue. Rejection has become protection. This paranoid magnification, intrapsychically populated with new persecutory introjects, intensifies affect (fear and anger), maintains narcissistic equilibrium (the erotomanic and object as the sole focus of the attention of others), and becomes an ideational substitute for actual, affectional bonding (love).

Fantasies of rescue in erotomanic delusion may be the psychotic basis for acts of violence that are planned, purposeful, emotionless, and quite lethal. The case of Mr. A underscores, once again, the importance of forensically recognizing that predatory violence can be delusionally motivated (19). It also suggests that the persecutory (threat/control override) aspects of delusions (20) may increase the risk of an attack on a third party when triangulation is involved. As is true for the few erotomanic individuals who are violent, Mr. A could not adhere to the wisdom of Shakespeare: “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” (*The Tempest*, V.i. 755–6).

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Additional information and reprint requests:
J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D.
964 Fifth Ave., Suite 409
San Diego, CA 92101