

Approaching and Attacking Public Figures: A Contemporary Analysis of Communications and Behavior

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A review of the contemporary research on problematic communications, approaches, and attacks on public figures yields important findings. Analysis of both theory and empirical research is presented concerning the movement from communication to approach; the relationship among behavioral pathways, motivations, and psychiatric disorders; applied concepts such as fixation, grandiosity, and entitled reciprocity; a typology of superordinate and dynamic patterns of warning behaviors; the relevance of social media and the Internet; assassination and psychosis; the predatory and instrumental nature of public figure attacks; the politics of hatred and “lone terrorists;” leakage; new threat research; depression and suicidality; psychopathy; and threats to the children of public figures. Recommendations for threat assessment and future operational research are offered.

Keywords: assassination, attacks, stalking, public figures, threats

There has been significant research during the past decade on abnormal or threatening communication and its relationship to escalation, approach, or attack behavior toward public figures (Hoffmann, Meloy, & Sheridan, 2014; Meloy, Sheridan, & Hoffmann, 2008). This study is a review and critical integration of research pertinent to the operational needs of both public and private security, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies tasked with the mission of protecting public figures. It includes findings from recent studies (Eke, Meloy, Brooks, Jean, & Hilton, 2014; James et al., 2008, 2010; James, Mullen, et al., 2009; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2014; Meloy et al., 2011;

Unsgaard & Meloy, 2011; van der Meer, Bootsma, & Meloy, 2012), as well as theoretical advances not yet empirically tested.

The study is divided into two sections: problematic approaches and attacks. The former refers to any behavior that entails physical movement toward a target that is potentially disruptive or threatening. The latter refers to any near-lethal approach, attack, or assassination of the targeted individual. This division is not arbitrary, but quite necessary, given the disparate research that has been conducted on samples of problematic approachers and samples of attackers, and, in some cases, the divergence of results. It is the author’s hope that detailing these differences and similarities will broaden and deepen our understanding of such behaviors, and also contribute to advancements in operational research while ensuring the safety of the designated protectee.

Problematic Approaches

Predicting Movement From Communication to Approach

A detailed analysis of six studies—five of which were random samples—of problematic approaches to public figures in the United States and Europe, both politicians and celebrities, indicates a high degree of consistency across six

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headings that predict movement from communication to an approach (Meloy et al., 2011). The six studies in this analysis (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991; James, Mullen, et al., 2009; Meloy, Mohandie, & Green, 2008; Scalora et al., 2002a, 2002b) utilized variables that were similar enough to each other to warrant these six headings, and provided quantitative data that show a statistically significant difference between approachers and nonapproachers toward the six samples of public figures. The six headings are as follows, and indicate the direction of a greater likelihood of an approach: (a) no threatening communications, (b) serious mental illness, (c) requests for help, (d) multiple means of communications, (f) multiple contacts and targets, and (g) no antagonistic communications.

No threatening communications refers to the absence of an expressed desire to do harm, or have physical harm occur, to the target; *serious mental illness* refers to the presence of psychosis, indicated by evidence of hallucinations, delusions, or formal thought disorder, during the activity of concern; *requests for help* refers to the subject asking for help from the target; *multiple means of communications* refers to the subject utilizing at least two methods of communication out of many, such as writing letters, telephoning, e-mailing, sending gifts or enclosures, or faxing; *multiple contacts or targets* was the most disparate heading, and combined the subject's repetitive contact of the target through any communication and the subject's contact of other public figure targets—both shared the characteristics of repetitiveness and dispersion; and *no antagonistic communications* refers to the absence of any hostile, abusive, or degrading aspects to the communications.

Four of these six studies also conducted logistic regressions to see how accurately an approach could be predicted. Overall, correct classification ranged from 76.4% to 83%, which is 25% to 35% better than chance if one hypothetically assumes a 50% base rate for approach within each study, even though actual approach probabilities were much lower. Although the predictor variables across the four studies differed, *multiple communications and/or contacts with other targets* emerged as a predictor variable in each of the

four studies. It appears that a common thread across these four predictor studies, as well as the other two studies, is a level of energy, motivation, and fixation—an *intensity of effort*—on the part of the subject as a necessary prelude to approaching the target, operationally measured by multiple communications to the target and/or contacts with other public figures.

Although the consistency of these findings is quite promising, further research is necessary to cross-validate the results. Research designs could simply compare random samples of both approachers and nonapproachers to see if these six variables (a) continued to both discriminate between the two groups, and (b) also functioned in some circumstances as predictors of a problematic approach. Two studies subsequent to this work have done so. Van der Meer et al. (2012) found that no threatening communications and multiple means of communication to the Dutch Royal Family were more frequent in the communicators who approached than those who did not. Eke et al. (2014) conducted the first prospective study of threatening and otherwise inappropriate communications toward public figures and found that threatening communications also decreased the risk of an approach to Canadian justice officials—yet increased the risk of criminal offending toward others. The sole significant predictor of subsequent offending against a Canadian justice official was a mental health diagnosis. Both of these studies further validate some of the results of Meloy et al. (2011).

The operational application of the findings in Meloy et al. (2011), however, have historically been somewhat misguided. A proportion of subjects whose communication characteristics are the opposite of these variables will move from communication to approach. This statistical reality was often overlooked in interpretation of the early research by readers who focused on significant differences between approachers and nonapproachers instead of actual frequencies. The assumption made by readers of this research was that a significantly less difference meant that the lesser category had a zero frequency of the behavior. This is obviously a logical error, but appears to have become operationalized in

some threat assessments, for example, the false belief that if there is no communicated threat, there is no risk; or that those who make a direct threat do not pose a threat. As an example, here are data from the same series of public figure studies that indicate the proportion of subjects who directly threatened the target, and then *did* make a subsequent approach: Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al. (1991): 33%; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al. (1991): 23%; Meloy, Mohandie, et al. (2008): 35%; Scalora et al. (2002a): 21.4%; Scalora et al. (2002b): 41.3%. Even though these proportions were, in most cases, significantly less than those who directly threatened and did not subsequently approach, they tended to be minimized, and often dismissed, when the results of the studies, particularly the Dietz et al. studies (Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al., 1991; Dietz, Matthews, Van Duyne, et al., 1991), were communicated orally from one professional to another. The within-study interpretation of these data was also problematic. For example, in Dietz, Matthews, Martell, et al. (1991), concerning threats and approaches to U.S. Congressional members, they wrote, “Subjects who sent threats to a member of Congress were significantly less likely to pursue a face to face encounter with him or her” (p. 1466). This is statistically accurate as a group inference, but could wrongly be interpreted as meaning that the articulation of a direct threat *would reduce risk* in any one subject who threatened—an interpretation that did not apply to one third of their sample.

All future studies should emphasize this point, and not only detail significant differences but also frequencies, the effect size of the differences preferably measured by the phi coefficient, the odds ratios, and confidence intervals of the odds ratios; receiver operating characteristic analysis can also be used to interpret predictive findings to ensure that base rates are not influencing predictive outcome statements. The difficult problem of applying nomothetic (large group) data to the individual case should also be noted (Hart, Michie, & Cooke, 2007), wherein membership in a class does not necessarily imply individual predictive accuracy.

Behavioral Pathway, Motivation, and Mental Disorder

Any odd, inappropriate, bizarre, or threatening communication to a public figure cannot be fully understood without other data on the subject, especially the behavioral pathway, motivation, and the nature of his or her mental disorder. *Behavioral pathway* refers to the behavioral markers along which an individual may progress if he moves from communication to close physical proximity to the target. It was advanced by Dietz and Martell (1989), systematically studied by Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999), demarcated into stages by Calhoun and Weston (2003), and has most recently been applied to studies of problematic approaches to the British Royal Family. James, Mullen, et al. (2009) divided the stages into preapproach communications, communications and approach, approach without communications, unsuccessful breach of security, successful breach of security, and attack. Such a pathway analysis yielded important behavioral findings, most notably the degree to which they are influenced by both motivation and mental disorder. *Motivation* refers to the reason for the behavioral approach, and this may be driven by “psychotic action” (Junginger, 1996)—behaviors driven by delusions or hallucinations—or not. The *nature of the mental disorder*, if present, is most important if analyzed according to symptoms (Douglas, Guy, & Hart, 2009), and whether or not it causes, mediates, moderates, correlates with, or is unrelated to the motivation for the approach.

Three recent typologies attempt to address these aspects of public figure stalkers. Phillips (2006, 2008) identified five categories among an unknown number of subjects who problematically approached protectees of the U.S. Secret Service: resentful, pathologically obsessed, infamy seeking, intimacy seeking, and nuisance or attention seeking. His typology focused upon motive, positive symptoms of psychosis, and intent to do harm, but did not incorporate a behavioral pathway analysis. James, Mullen, et al. (2009) identified eight motivational types among a random sample of 275 problematic approachers toward the British Royal Family: delusions of royal identity, amity seekers, intimacy seekers, sanctuary

and help seekers, royally persecuted, counselors, querulants (vexatious litigants), and the chaotic (those whose behaviors and motivations were highly disorganized). Their motivational typology was studied in relation to both the behavioral pathway and serious mental disorder. This typology was also utilized in a subsequent study of problematic approaches to the Dutch Royal Family (van der Meer et al., 2012). A group of researchers in Australia—several of them involved in the British Royal Family studies—composed the Stalking Risk Profile (MacKenzie et al., 2009), identifying eight motivational categories for public figure stalkers: resentful, intimacy seekers, incompetent suitors, predatory (sexual motivation), help seekers, attention seekers, the chaotic, and unclassified. The Stalking Risk Profile has been designed for risk management of such cases, and is a structured professional judgment instrument (Monahan, 2000). Although typologies may seem irrelevant to operational tasks, they are not. A typology developed from a random sample of subjects of concern can bring more efficiency to the assignment and utilization of protective intelligence resources. Such work, along with mental disorder and behavioral pathway research, could eventuate in an iterative decision-tree model for determining risk of problematic approaches toward or stalking of a protectee, much like the Classification of Violence Risk, developed for prediction of short-term violence risk among discharged patients from acute psychiatric facilities (Monahan, 2010; Monahan et al., 2001).

Typologies need to be empirically tested prior to operational application to see if they have both interjudge reliability and various kinds of validity across a number of variables important to protection, such as the prediction of a successful breach of security. The Phillips (2006, 2008) typology has not yet been empirically tested, but holds promise, given its derivation from actual threateners and approachers identified by the U.S. Secret Service. Across all the typologies, moreover, there appears to be a superordinate variable with both clinical and behavioral significance, which is called fixation—from the Latin *figo*, to be bound fast.

Fixation

Emerging research indicates the importance of *fixation*, an intense preoccupation with an individual, activity, or idea (Meloy, Sheridan, et al., 2008; Mullen, James, et al., 2009). Normal fixations are a part of everyday life, and include such states as romantic love, parental devotion, intense loyalty, and adulation. Pathological fixations are obsessive preoccupations that typically result in deterioration of the subject's intimate, social, and occupational life (Leets, de Becker, & Giles, 1995; Mullen, James, et al., 2009; Schlesinger, 2006). Such pathological fixations focus upon a *person* or a *cause*, the latter an intensely personal grievance or quest for justice that inhibits effective social functioning and alienates others. Research in Europe indicates that fixation on a cause is related to risk of attack. In a study of all nonterrorist attacks on Western European politicians between 1990 and 2003 (James et al., 2007; $N = 24$), 50% were fixated on a cause. In a study of attacks on the British Royal Family between 1778 and 1994 (James et al., 2008; $N = 23$), 63% of subjects for which the motivation could be discerned ($n = 19$) were fixated on a cause. Although it is difficult to make this distinction in the U.S. Secret Service Exceptional Case Study (ECSP; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999), 67% of the near-lethal approachers, attackers, and assassins had a grievance, and motivations that suggested a focus on a cause included avenging a perceived wrong, bringing national attention to a perceived problem, saving the country or the world, and bringing about political change. Fixation on a *cause* may be a moderating variable (affects the strength of the relationship) or mediating variable (explains the reason for the relationship) between problematic approach and intent to attack, but needs to be empirically studied (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Such fixations are distinguished from political extremism, which usually emerges in interactions among a group on the fringes of the normal political process and is not as intensely personalized; however, fixations are likely present in the lone terrorist (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014).

The nature of the fixations evident in abnormal communications to public figures have been studied in the context of British and Western European attackers (James et al., 2007,

2008). They may predict certain subsequent behavioral pathways or escalations. The empirical question is whether fixation on a cause incrementally contributes to risk of an attack on a public figure, apparently most relevant to politicians and government officials (Hoffmann et al., 2014). The superordinate, and perhaps clinically obscure, concept of fixation, moreover, is often behaviorally evident in warning behaviors.

Warning Behaviors

Emerging research supports the belief that *warning behaviors* are important and should be construed as much broader than a specific threat (Meloy, James, et al., 2004; Scalora et al., 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Warning behaviors are acute, dynamic accelerating *patterns* of risk that often show an intensity of effort to further a particular quest, usually some highly personal matter directed toward a cause or an individual. They often predict an approach (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, & Guldemann 2014), but with some exceptions (Scalora, Baumgartner, & Plank, 2003). Intensity is usually measured in frequency of contact, duration of contact, multiple means of contact, and multiple contacts with other figures (target dispersion), and is associated with the presence of serious mental disorder in the research (James, Mullen, et al., 2009; Scalora et al., 2002b). Warning behaviors are also present in the attack research. In contemporary Western European attacks (James et al., 2007), 46% of the subjects evidenced warning behaviors before attacking—such as chaotic, deluded letters or telling friends about the attack—and were more likely to have a mental disorder ($\phi = 0.77$ effect size), to be psychotic at the time (0.65), and to show clear evidence of delusional beliefs (0.65) at the time of the attack—all large effect sizes. In the ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999)—despite the very low frequency of direct threats toward the target or law enforcement (7%)—the majority of the subjects had a history of verbal or written communication about the target (77%), one out of four communicated to the target (23%), and 63% had a history of indirect, conditional, or direct threats about the target. Specific warning behaviors may be another moderating or mediating variable between the problematic approach and the attack research,

but there are, as yet, no studies that have found warning behaviors that predict an attack. There are many case studies, however, that retrospectively identify certain warning behaviors after an attack as predictors of that attack, but such fallacious reasoning without comparison samples does not advance science and typically involve certain inductive fallacies such as hindsight bias; it would be most useful to determine both the specificity and sensitivity of certain warning behaviors in relationship to an attack—a task easier said than done. But first, the fundamental difficulty with warning behaviors has been a lack of clarity in definition. Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, and James (2012) recently proposed that such warning behaviors—superordinate patterns, not individual risk factors—can be divided into eight categories, as follows:

1. Pathway warning behavior—any behavior that is part of research, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack (Cahoun & Weston, 2003; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999).
2. Fixation warning behavior—any behavior that indicates an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a public figure or a highly personalized cause (Mullen, James, et al., 2009).
3. Identification warning behavior—any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to be a pseudocommando (Dietz, 1986), have a warrior mentality (Hempel, Meloy, & Richards, 1999), closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system (Meloy, 2011).
4. Novel aggression warning behavior—an act of violence that appears unrelated to any warning behavior pathway that is committed for the first time.
5. Energy burst warning behavior—an increase in the frequency or variety of any activities toward the target, usually in the days or weeks before the attack.
6. Leakage warning behavior—any communication to a third party of intent to do harm to a target through an attack (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011).

7. Last resort warning behavior—increasing desperation or distress through declaration in word or deed; evidence of a violent time or action imperative (Mohandie & Duffy, 1999).
8. Directly communicated threat warning behavior—communication of a direct threat to the target or law enforcement before an attack.

This typology has received some initial empirical testing. Its generalizability was tested in various domains of targeted violence and found to have a reasonable goodness of fit (Hoffmann, Meloy, Guldemann, & Ermer, 2011; Meloy et al., 2014). Five of the warning behaviors—pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, and last resort—were also found to statistically distinguish with large effect sizes between a small sample of German school shooters and other students of concern (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, & Guldemann, 2014). Three of the warning behaviors from the typology—fixation, identification, and leakage—have also been recommended for linguistic data-mining efforts to detect “weak signals” or digital traces of lone terrorists who are communicating through the Internet (Brynielsson et al., 2013; Cohen, Johansson, Kaati, & Mork, 2014).

Grandiosity and Entitled Reciprocity

Grandiosity and entitled reciprocity have emerged as two important psychological characteristics of subjects who approach. They suggest both psychopathology, in general, and pathological narcissism, in particular. Grandiosity, an exaggerated sense of self-importance evident in communications, was tested in a logistic regression model in a study of those who approached or did not approach members of the British Royal Family (James et al., 2010). A regression for a model comprising the single factor of grandiosity produced an AUC of 0.74 (95% confidence interval [0.65, 0.82]), and correctly predicted 73.7% of the cases: 73.8% of the approachers and 73.6% of the nonapproachers. The effect size was moderate ($\phi = 0.47$). Dietz and Martell (1989) found in their study 25 years ago that those who approached celebrities were significantly more likely ($\chi^2 = 4.85, p < .03$) to evidence an excessive sense of self-

importance or uniqueness (52%) than those who did not approach (36%). If subjects who problematically approached members of the U.S. Congress took a “special constituent role,” it did significantly increase the risk of an approach (46% vs. 16%, $\chi^2 = 7.77, p = .0053$). However, grandiosity did not distinguish between communicators and approachers in the Dutch Royal Family study; but breachers of security in the Dutch study were more likely to be grandiose than those who approached but did not breach security (van der Meer et al., 2012). Grandiosity can be somewhat grounded in reality (“I can dramatically influence the votes in my district!”) or delusional (“I am the President!”). In many cases, grandiosity among such subjects compensates in fantasy for real-life failures in both work and love. It is one facet of pathological narcissism, an aspect of personality that is quite apparent in stalkers (Meloy, 1998; Mullen, Pathe, & Purcell, 2009), and is an abnormal variant of narcissism, most clearly defined by Rothstein (1980) as “a felt quality of perfection” (p. 4). Grandiosity is also apparent in the attack research, specifically the ECSP study. Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999) reported that in 38% of the principal incidents of near-lethal approach, attack, or assassination ($N = 74$), there was evidence that attention or notoriety was a goal. Among the eight motives they cited for attacking, one can infer grandiosity, or the wish to achieve such importance, in five: to achieve notoriety/fame, to bring national attention to a perceived problem, to save the country or the world, to achieve a special relationship with the target, or to bring about political change.

A close female friend of Lee Harvey Oswald in Minsk between 1959 and 1962, prior to his assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, reflected on his personality years later:

I could paint a portrait of him as someone who thinks too much of himself but doesn't work to become the person he wants to be . . . The most important thing for Lee was that he wanted to become famous. Idea number one. He was fanatic about it, I think. Goal number one. Show that he was different from others, and you know, he achieved this goal. (Mailer, 1995, p. 321)

The psychiatric social worker at the Youth House in Manhattan, where Oswald was briefly placed as a young adolescent for chronic truancy, recorded similar findings: “He acknowledged fantasies about being all-powerful and

being able to do anything he wanted. When asked if this ever involved hurting or killing people, he said that it did sometimes but refused to elucidate on it" (Mailer, 1995, p. 365).

A particular sense of entitlement, "entitled reciprocity" (Meloy, Sheridan, et al., 2008, p. 5), is the belief that the public figure owes the subject time and attention because of the time and attention the subject has paid to the public figure. It is also an aspect of pathological narcissism, and is related to grandiosity: The subject's importance demands that he receive the attention he deserves. In the British Royal Family study (James et al., 2010), three motivations together accounted for 71.8% of the cases in which the communicators went on to approach—those with delusions of royalty, amity seekers, and intimacy seekers. Among all these motivations is the subject's belief, often delusional, that he is owed a debt of gratitude through blood ties, friendship, or love. Entitled reciprocity, however, has not been measured but may be an important predictor of resentment, and perhaps aggression in certain subjects who are shunned by the public figure. This could develop over time when communications are not responded to, or it could be an acutely negative emotional reaction when a highly anticipated personal encounter with the public figure instead results in disappointment, or the humiliation of being ignored.

Electronic Communications to Public Figures

There is little research contrasting the use of electronic communications, such as e-mail, and other forms of written communication toward public figures—with two exceptions (Schoeneman et al., 2011; Schoeneman-Morris, Scalora, Chang, Zimmerman, & Garner, 2007). The first study comparing e-mails and letters to members of the U.S. Congress found that letter writers were more problematic: They were significantly more likely to exhibit symptoms of severe mental illness, engage in multiple target contacts, use multiple methods of contact, and approach the target. E-mailers focused on government concerns, used obscene language, and displayed disorganization significantly more often. They also expended less overall effort. Threatening language was found in about half the communications, with no significant differences be-

tween the two groups. E-mail communication in general did not predict an approach "unless communication was part of a campaign with other forms of communication" (Scalora, 2014, p. 219). In Schoeneman et al. (2011), both letter writers and e-mailers who subsequently approached were compared with nonapproachers: Approachers were more likely to be mentally ill, exhibit threat control-override symptoms (Stompe, Ortwein-Swoboda, & Schanda, 2004), engage in previous contact behavior, use multiple methods of contact, emphasize personal themes, make more contact in general, show evidence of agitation, and make demands in their correspondence. Many of these behaviors are consistent with the findings in Meloy et al. (2011) and extend the validity of *intensity* of effort or pursuit.

The research possibilities concerning electronic communications exponentially grow as various new platforms for such communications are invented. Any attempts to contrast samples of written letters and electronic communications to public figures with a focus upon variables that predict a problematic approach would contribute to this nascent area of investigation.

Making or Posing a Threat

The distinction between making and posing a threat, first enunciated by Fein, Vossekuil, and Holden (1995), and utilized in their ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999), has permeated the threat assessment community over the past 20 years as an important theoretical construct and operational focus (Calhoun, 1998; Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2008). The phrase challenged the historical assumption among both mental health and law enforcement professionals that those who made a direct threat posed the greatest risk, and articulated threats were central to threat assessment. The challenge derived from the fact that none of the subjects who attacked or assassinated a U.S. public figure in the second half of the 20th century communicated a direct threat to law enforcement or the target beforehand (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). Subsequent research with other public-figure-attack data is quite clear that suspicious behavior ("warning behaviors") should be considered more important than a directly communicated threat when assessing the risk of an approach (Meloy, James, et al., 2004) to any public fig-

ure. For instance, James et al. (2007) also found that none of the subjects who attacked a Western European politician between 1990 and 2004 directly communicated a threat beforehand. Such findings have moved threats from principal actor to supporting role in the theater of public figure threat assessment. However, warning behaviors—the somewhat obscure elements of a still undefined construct called “posing a threat”—are not clearly enunciated in the research, as noted earlier, and characteristics that lead to the decision that a subject “poses a threat” are also unknown. To further muddy the waters, it is also known that, in certain cases, those who make threats also pose threats (Scalora, 2014; Scalora et al., 2002a, 2002b).

The elements of such behaviors should be consistently defined and further studied to yield predictive data. This could include, but not be limited to, a standardized definition of “posing a threat,” and identifying the decision-making tree that leads to the perception of a “posed threat” by threat assessment professionals. One approach is to empirically study the various levels of concern and threat currently utilized by public and private security agencies to see if they are reliably applied to various cases, and the degree to which they validly predict certain approach behaviors, or necessary interventions to curtail such approaches (arrest, hospitalization, surveillance, etc.). An important group of individuals that also merits study are those who problematically approach a public figure, do not communicate beforehand, and are not intending an attack. This group has been sorely neglected in the research to date. In the British Royal Family study (James, Mullen, et al., 2009), this group was analyzed and were more likely to behave in an intimidating manner and more likely to attempt to breach security, and much less likely to be fixated on the prominent target than the approachers who communicated beforehand. This group (approach/no communication/no intent to attack) was not utilized as a comparison group in the U.S. Secret Service ECSP research, which could have provided useful information. A subsequent study of communicators and approachers toward the Dutch Royal Family (van der Meer et al., 2012) also studied this group (approach/no communication/no intent to attack). They found that this group was also severely mentally ill, but less fixated, more engaged in recommended psychi-

atric treatment, and less likely to be seeking to bring attention to a problem than the communicators who also approached the Dutch Royal Family. The researchers wrote,

This is a potentially difficult and aggressive group, since the protection detail will have no early warning through communications that these particular subjects may approach. Such cases confirm the notion that threat assessment in some cases can only be done at the point of first contact by the personal protection officers, not the threat assessors. (van der Meer et al., 2012, p. 15)

Attacks and Assassinations

Mental Disorder, Attacks, and Assassinations

Research indicates the importance of mental disorder in a large proportion of subjects who attack public figures (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999; James et al., 2007; James et al., 2008; Meloy, James, et al., 2004). The substantial presence of mental disorder contrasts with the recommendations that diminished the importance of mental disorder in the ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999), but not their findings: 61% of their subjects had been evaluated by a mental health professional, 43% had a history of delusions and were delusional at the time of their attack or near-lethal approach, and 21% had a history of auditory hallucinations. However, Fein and Vossekuil (1999) make several important points: (a) within the delusion, the behavior toward the target may be quite rational; and (b) focusing upon the “thinking that leads a person to see assassination as an acceptable, or necessary action” (p. 332) is operationally much more useful than labeling or diagnosing the person with a particular mental disorder. Their position has been supported by a large meta-analysis of the relationship between psychosis and violence (Douglas et al., 2009), which found that studies coded at the level of the symptom had significantly higher effect sizes, particularly active positive symptoms (delusions, hallucinations, etc.), when studying the violence–psychosis relationship.

Psychosis and delusions at the time have also been found to be positively correlated with lethality risk (death or serious injury) in contemporary attacks on Western European politicians (James et al., 2007; $\phi = 0.49$); and delusional content strongly influenced the motivation, and

thus the behavioral pathway, toward historical attacks on members of the British Royal Family (James et al., 2008). Hoffmann et al. (2011) have found that the majority of the small universe of potentially lethal attackers of public figures in Germany (1968 to 2004) were psychotic at the time ($N = 9$). All but one of these attacks occurred since 1990, and the attacks were mostly directed at politicians. A related body of work concerning mass murderers also found that psychosis is significantly and positively correlated with a higher casualty rate (Meloy, Hempel, et al., 2004). However, the ECSP study found a significantly lower frequency of delusion ($p = .004$) between the attackers (25%) and the near-lethal approachers (60%) in their study ($n = 73$) of mental state at the time of the principal incident.

It would be quite useful to conduct a subsequent study of near-lethal approachers, attackers, and assassins of public figures in the United States since 1996. One aspect of analysis could focus upon the relationship of mental disorder, particularly active and positive symptoms of psychosis, to the thinking that justified the attack.

Moreover, studies from attacks on public figures in the United States (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999; Meloy, James, et al., 2004; Schlesinger & Mesa, 2008), the United Kingdom (James et al., 2008), Western Europe (James et al., 2007), and Germany (Hoffmann et al., 2011) underscore the fact that serious mental disorder does not mitigate risk of a planful attack on a public figure. All studies indicate that despite the presence of mental illness, subjects can carefully plan an attack over the course of days, weeks, or months. What has not been studied, however, is whether the nature of the mental disorder (e.g., a delusional belief in one's mission) may bring a resolve and commitment to the planning that would otherwise be absent, or at least marked by ambivalence in the subject who was not delusional while planning his attack.

Predatory and Affective Violence

Most acts of violence toward public figures are predatory (instrumental), and involve a weapon, most likely a firearm (Meloy, 2006; de Becker, Taylor, & Marquart, 2008; Meloy, James, et al., 2004; Schlesinger & Mesa, 2008).

This was documented in the ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999) and was confirmed in the Western European attacks study (James et al., 2007). There is also a suggestion in the emerging research that most individuals who embark on a pathway toward violence also do not use mind-altering substances at the time of the attack. This is in stark contrast to affective (impulsive, emotional) violence, in which substance abuse at the time of the attack is quite common (e.g., most acts of spousal violence, which are usually affective, involve alcohol intoxication by the perpetrator, victim, or both; Miller, 1990). It is a reasonable hypothesis, although untested, that subjects engaging in attack behavior toward a public figure will not use substances to increase the probability of tactical success, just as they typically will not explicitly threaten before an attack. There are a few cases, moreover, in which subjects engaging in predatory violence used psychotropic medications (barbiturates or sedative-hypnotics) to deliberately maintain a state of calmness during the violence. These known cases did not involve public figure attacks (Meloy & Mohandie, 2001). There is also the anecdotal finding in certain cases that specific loss (job, family, reputation, income, etc.) precedes implementation of an attack, and may actually be the point at which the exact location, timing, and target selection is set—even though an attack has been contemplated for weeks or months. This loss is either cumulative or sudden, and there is likely to be a predisposition to attack a public figure that precedes it, but without specificity of time, target, or location. These patterns of loss have yet to be studied among attackers and assassins of public figures, particularly in relationship to location, timing, and target selection.

Although the attack research indicates that most acts of violence toward public figures are predatory rather than affective, the latter do occur. In one celebrity study (Meloy, Mohandie, et al., 2008), the majority of the small number of attacks ($n = 5$) against a sample of 159 celebrity victims were affective and did not involve a weapon. They usually involved attempts to grab the celebrity during a public appearance, or to assault security personnel. This celebrity sample was embedded in a larger study of stalkers (Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, & Williams, 2006; $N = 1,005$). When all acts of violence ($n = 337$) were compared in this latter

study, those stalkers who had an actual relationship (prior intimate or acquaintance groups) with the target were more likely to be affectively violent, and those without a relationship (public figure and private stranger groups) were more likely to be predatorily violent ($p = .001$). Affective violence toward a public figure appears most likely to occur when there is a *perceived* rejection by the public figure, which could happen in a moment, such as the public figure not shaking hands with, or making eye contact with, the subject in a rope line as expected; or security interfering with attempted contact between the subject and the public figure (James et al., 2010). This may be clinically more likely in the individual who has a strong sense of entitled reciprocity and grandiosity.

Conflation of the Politics of Hatred

One of the most important emerging trends in threats toward U.S. public figures is the conflation of the various politics of hatred, which then becomes a pathological fixation. This contemporary conflation usually includes the hatred of African Americans, Jews, the federal government, those who support abortion rights, or gun control advocates. Pathological fixation strongly suggests a major mental disorder diagnosis, or at least a paranoid-tinged rigid and intolerant belief system, which draws its content from the various politics of hatred. This conflation may have a number of real-world stimuli, such as the election of an African American as President of the United States in November 2008; the appointment of the President's first Chief of Staff, who was Jewish and characterized by the popular media as aggressive; the perceived expansion of the federal government—although, in actuality, there was a reduction in the federal workforce—through the various fiscal actions taken in response to the Great Recession of 2008 to 2009; and the President's support of abortion rights. The irrationality of the threat to gun ownership, for example, in some quarters was evidenced by the substantial increase in firearms sales throughout the United States during the first six months of 2009, out of fear that the U.S. President would confiscate such weapons—despite the fact that the U.S. President had clearly supported the individual rights' interpretation of the Second Amendment, including the recent U.S. Supreme Court

decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008).

This conflation raises a question as to whether there should be a strict operational demarcation between a terrorist threat and a fixated threat, especially if a fixated subject's secondary motivation is to instill public fear or foment revolution. It also emphasizes the risk of the ideologically driven "lone terrorist" or "lone wolf" who is acting outside of a terrorist cell or extremist group, often despite—or because of—his failed attempts to associate with the latter (Biesterfeld & Meloy, 2008; Meloy & Yakeley, 2014; Puckitt, 2001). Puckitt's (2001) finding that lone terrorists often unsuccessfully try to affiliate with an extremist group, are then rejected, which then further cements their bond to a radical ideology, has direct operational implications for surveillance of such groups. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols attempted to associate with the Michigan Militia in the years prior to the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, but were rejected by the group for advocating direct violence against the government (author's files from *U.S. vs. Timothy James McVeigh*, 1996).

What at first appears to be a purely political motivation may or may not also mask a diagnosable psychiatric condition wherein a political, religious, or racial hatred provides the rationale for homicidal aggression. The clearest case example of the completed assassination of a public figure that was politically motivated, yet was interpreted in the subsequent criminal litigation as primarily motivated by psychiatric disorder, was the killing of Robert F. Kennedy by Sirhan Sirhan in 1968 (Meloy, 1992a, 1992b). Another recent case that involved an initial diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia—and then a competing diagnosis of severe personality disorder—but was clearly motivated by political hatred, was the Norwegian lone terrorist, Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in two attacks on July 22, 2011.

U. S. Marine Lance Corporal Kody Brittingham was arrested in December 2008 for attempted armed robbery of a motel with two other Marines. In his barracks at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, were found maps, photos, personal vital statistics of President-Elect Barack Obama—who had yet to assume office—and White supremacist material. There was also a letter, which was titled "Operation Patriot":

I, Kody Brittingham, write this as a letter of intent. I'm in full mental health and clear judgment, having consciously made a decision, and in turn do so choose to carry out the actions entailed. I have sworn to defend my country, my Constitution, and the values and virtues of the aforementioned. My vow was to protect against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. I have found, through much research, evidence to support my current state of mind. Having found said domestic enemy (BHO), it is my duty and honor to carry out by all means necessary to protect my nation and her people from this threat. ("Threats Against Obama," 2009)

Lance Corporal Brittingham pled guilty in August 2009 to threatening to kill the President and attempted armed robbery. Although there is no publicly available evidence that this subject had a diagnosable mental disorder, the conflation of racism and patriotism is a reasonable inference. The increased threat of the politics of hatred, at this point in time coming from the extreme right, has been documented in reports by the [Department of Homeland Security \(2009\)](#) and the [Southern Poverty Law Center \(2009\)](#).

Leakage

The warning behavior that often initiates a threat assessment investigation is "leakage" of intent to do harm to the target, whether oblique or specific, to third parties ([Meloy & O'Toole, 2011](#); [O'Toole, 2000](#)). Leakage is defined as the communication to a third party of intent to do harm to a target, and is one of eight types of warning behaviors noted earlier. Leakage is a shared characteristic of both public assassins and, in a related area of criminal violence, mass murderers ([Hempel et al., 1999](#); [Meloy, Hempel, et al., 2004](#)): Individuals in both groups desire to carry out a very low frequency, but highly catastrophic, act of violence against an intended target (either identified beforehand or opportunistic). These may be "black swan" events. This term is borrowed and applied from *The Black Swan* ([Taleb, 2007](#)) and refers to highly improbable events that have three characteristics: they are outliers that most would not consider possible; they carry an extreme impact; and we concoct explanations after the fact to make them predictable. One single observation can invalidate a general statement derived from years of confirmatory findings.

In the ECSP study ([Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999](#)), 63% of the subjects ($N = 83$) had a

history of indirect, conditional, or direct threats *about* the target, usually to family, friends, co-workers, or others known to the target. There were no direct threats to the target or law enforcement beforehand among those who attacked or assassinated their target (if near-lethal approachers are included, this direct threat frequency increases from 0% to 7%). In the Western European study ([James et al., 2007](#)), 46% of the attacks ($N = 24$) were preceded "by obvious and often flamboyant warning behaviors in the form of threatening or bizarre communications to politicians, public figures, or police forces" (p. 342). There were no cases in which the attack was preceded by a direct threat to kill the targeted individual. Among adult mass murderers, the majority leak their intent to third parties, but only a minority communicate a direct threat to their targets beforehand ([Meloy, Hempel, et al., 2004](#)). Although the reasons for this dynamic likely vary from case to case, it is most plausible that the absence of a direct threat is motivated by a desire for tactical success; and the prevalence of leakage is the inability of the subject to contain his excitement, satisfaction, or anxiety while researching, planning, and implementing his attack.

Leakage is also evident in journals, diaries, and electronically via the Internet, but has yet to be formally studied in this latter domain of communication. A recent example of leakage on the Internet is the 9 months' blogging carried out by George Sodini before his mass murder near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 4, 2009. He mentioned in his blog the mass murder and the planned time, and also inferred the target. He discussed one "false start" and his preparations. The irony of this case is that the entire world could have paid attention to him, and no one did. In a small, exploratory study of prior knowledge of the threat of school violence, including leakage, whether or not the threatening behaviors or statements were communicated to authorities depended upon the school climate, whether the threat was believed to eventuate in an attack, judgment concerning the likelihood and imminency of the attack, and the influence of parents or parental figures ([Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008](#)). However, in another study, leakage as a warning behavior did not discriminate between German school shooters and school threateners, although five other warning behaviors did: pathway, fixation,

identification, novel aggression, and last resort (Meloy et al., 2014). This should not diminish the importance of leakage, but it should be viewed as evidence that often initiates a threat assessment, and may lead to the uncovering of other more salient warning behaviors, rather than a predictor of targeted violence.

New Threat Research

Although leakage is typically much more prevalent than a direct threat when investigating a problematic approacher or potential attacker of a public figure, there is some new homicidal threat research, mostly related to nonpublic figure stalking and in a mental health context, that empirically supports the conventional belief that all threats must be taken seriously. Warren et al. (2008) found that there are substantially higher rates of assault and even homicide following threats to kill among a large sample ($N = 613$) of subjects convicted of threats to kill in Australia in the years 1993 to 1994. The offense required that the threat produced fear in the victim. The highest risk individuals for subsequent violence were those with mental disorders who also abused substances, were young, and did not have prior criminal convictions. The rate of homicide and suicide among the homicidal threateners almost exactly mirrored the results found in a classic study more than 40 years ago (MacDonald, 1963), and were at orders of magnitude higher than expected by chance (Warren, Mullen, Thomas, Ogloff, & Burgess, 2008). Within 10 years, 44% of the threateners were convicted of further violent offending, including 3% ($n = 19$) homicides. Twenty-six percent ($n = 5$) of the homicide victims were those originally threatened by the subject. Sixteen threateners (2.6%) committed suicide, and three were murdered. A clinical follow-up study indicated that substance abuse, prior violence, limited education, and untreated mental disorder contributed to any violence risk among those who threatened to kill (Warren, Mullen, & Ogloff, 2011). In another study, homicidal threateners were found to have a suspicious interpersonal style, be self-alienated and pessimistic, and have verbal skill deficits (Warren, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2013; see also Warren, Mullen, & McEwan, 2014).

Smith (2008) found that a sample of FBI threateners ($N = 96$) were more likely to act

harmfully if their communications showed lower ambivalent hostility and higher conceptual complexity. Lower ambivalent hostility was related to a lack of paranoia, and higher conceptual complexity was related to deliberative thinking. This finding of a lack of paranoia among those who harmed is also consistent with the British Royal Family problematic approach studies (James et al., 2008, 2010; James, Mullen, et al., 2009), which found that paranoia was negatively associated with breach activity, and with the ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999) and European attacks study (James et al., 2007) that documented the minor role of paranoia among assassins, attackers, and near-lethal approachers. In the FBI study, the author believed that the results could be generalized to all FBI National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes written threat cases, although only 10% of the cases involved public figures as targets (Smith, 2008). Data continue to emerge that threatening communicators, if they are subsequently violent, may not attack the original target of the communicated threat (see Eke et al., 2014).

Depression and Suicidality

Emerging research suggests the importance of depression and suicidality in the clinical motivation for an approach or attack on a public figure. Meloy, James, et al. (2004) found that many subjects evidenced a downward spiral in their lives in the months or year before the approach or attack, usually a combination of social failure and personal vulnerability to chronic anger, depression, or psychosis. Fein and Vossekuil (1998, 1999) found that 44% of their subjects had a history of serious depression or despair, and 24% had a history of suicidal attempts. James et al. (2007) found that 12% of Western European attackers clearly intended to die during the assault. Mohandie et al. (2006) found, in their large study of stalkers, that 25% evidenced suicidality (threats, gestures, attempts) in their histories. Violence perpetration by persons with major mental disorder is correlated with adverse outcomes such as suicide and self-harm (Nicholls, Brink, Desmarais, Webster, & Martin, 2006). Douglas et al. (2009) wrote, "Negative symptoms that result in depression or suicidality may increase violence risk, as morbid thoughts of self-harm may

change or expand in focus to include others” (p. 4). Public figure attacks, depression, and suicidality appear linked for several reasons: (a) the wish to “suicide by cop” (Mohandie, Meloy, & Collins, 2009) while attempting to attack or assassinate is a more public forum for the ending of one’s life, and may satisfy other narcissistic needs for attention; (b) the “suicidal” communication beforehand may be one aspect of “final act” behavior; (c) suicidal intent as one of several motivations for an attack on a public figure may be positively correlated with the amount of lethal-force security surrounding the target; and (d) suicidal desires or intent can be given a positive valence by redefining them as motivations for martyrdom and linking them to a religious or political cause (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014; Menninger, 1938; Reik, 1941). These motivations are, in turn, usually fueled by hatred (the intolerance of difference) of a particular race, ethnic group, religion, or political position, often combined with a fear of conspiracy or persecution by the targeted individual or group. Such fear may be quite paranoid without any basis in reality, or historically factual and reasonable, given personal or group suffering at the hands of another.

Psychopathy

At the other end of the clinical spectrum, and typically devoid of depressive symptoms, is the psychopathic attacker or assassin. The construct of *psychopathy* has received virtually no attention in the public figure stalking, threatening, and attacking research. Psychopathy, or psychopathic personality, is characterized by affective deficiency (no empathy, no bonding, no guilt or remorse) and chronic antisocial behavior (criminal and noncriminal exploitation of others; Hare, 2003). Research has never directly measured psychopathy in either problematic approachers or attackers of public figures, although it has been theoretically proposed as an important construct (O’Toole, Smith, & Hare, 2008). Most importantly, it is usually the construct that accounts for the largest proportion of explainable variance in both criminal and civil violence risk research (Monahan et al., 2001); it is a reliable and valid scientific construct that is relatively easily measured by competently trained professionals (Hare, 2003); it correlates with the risk of predatory (planned, purposeful)

violence, which is the most likely mode of violence when a public figure is attacked (Meloy, Sheridan, et al., 2008); and there now exists a security and law enforcement assessment tool for measuring psychopathy (P-SCAN RV, available from www.mhs.com).

The relationship between psychopathy and psychosis is also notable. When they coexist in a violent subject, the former will typically play a much larger role than the latter in accounting for the violence. The effect of psychosis on violence risk indicates a small although reliable effect size of $r = .12$ to $.16$ (Douglas et al., 2009). Psychopathy and its impact on violence show effect sizes between $.25$ to $.30$ (Douglas et al., 2009). Substance abuse produces a substantially larger effect size than does psychosis alone ($d = .97$; Douglas et al., 2009). In general, psychosis shows a significantly lower odds ratio for the prediction of violence than personality disorder.

The relevance to attacks on public figures is the operational importance, although not yet measured, of psychopathy, in particular, and personality disorder, in general, in motivating a near-lethal approach, attack, or assassination. In the ECSP study (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998, 1999), 39% of the subjects were never evaluated by a mental health professional and 57% had no history of delusional ideas. Seventy-five percent of attackers were not delusional during the principal incident, and 40% of the near-lethal approachers were not delusional. In the European attacks study (James et al., 2007), 46% were determined to have no mental disorder. These data highlight the reliable absence of mental disorder in a proportion of public figure attackers, and the likely presence, although unmeasured, of character pathology such as psychopathy as a motivational aspect for the assault. Clarke (1982) identified Type III subjects in his typology of U.S. assassins as psychopaths, wherein life is experienced as meaningless, and the motivation to assassinate is the nonpolitical expression of rage by someone devoid of human attachments and who does not experience the more socialized emotions of guilt, shame, or remorse. As Clarke wrote, “they are belligerently contemptuous of morality and social convention” (1982, p. 15). He identified three American assassins who fit this third type: Giuseppe Zangara, an Italian immigrant who attempted to kill President Franklin Roosevelt

on February 13, 1933; Arthur Bremer—released from a Maryland prison in November 2007—who crippled Alabama Governor George Wallace on May 15, 1972; and John Hinckley, Jr., who wounded President Ronald Reagan on March 30, 1981. Again, empirical measurement of psychopathy in these individuals has not been done, but could be accomplished without a clinical interview, given the extensive published materials on these subjects through the utilization of a standardized observational instrument, the Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (Hare, 2003).

The Pathway to Violence

Emerging research confirms the existence of a “pathway to violence” (Calhoun & Weston, 2003)—that is, the stages of grievance, ideation, research/planning, preparation, breach, and attack—but it is more complex than first formulated. Most approaches to a public figure are not intended to be, or are predictive of, violence (Meloy, Sheridan, et al., 2008). It depends on the motivation for the communication and approach, and the perceived reaction of the public figure, which will virtually always be personalized by the subject. For example, an initial approach motivated by a desire for beneficence might become subsequently aggressive and hostile if the expected response has not been forthcoming. Likewise, there may be no pathway at all, other than an initial approach that results in a successful breach of security and an attack. One example was the assassination of the Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh on September 10, 2003. Her attacker, Mijailo Mijailovic, had a fantasy of killing someone famous, and actually reported to a psychiatric clinic that he had murdered someone 6 days before the assassination. He was diagnosed with “a personality disorder intermittently bordering on psychosis” and was prescribed medications. He then subsequently and accidentally encountered Ms. Lindh without any security detail in a department store in Stockholm. Minutes later, he stabbed her to death in front of her friend. She was a target of opportunity and a thorough investigation indicated no evidence of prior planning (Unsgaard & Meloy, 2011).

There are other domains of risk besides a pathway to violence. Subjects may disrupt the public figure’s schedule. There may be recidi-

vism or persistence of pursuit (James, McEwan, et al., 2009). A problematic approacher may also embarrass or inconvenience the public figure through behaviors that pose no physical threat.

Communicated Threats Schematic

A schematic has been proposed to improve the clarity of analysis of communicated threats: motivation, means, manner, and material content (Meloy, Sheridan, et al., 2008). *Motivation* refers to whether the threat is expressive (to regulate affect of the threatener) or instrumental (to control the behavior of the target); *means* refers to the method of communication, such as letters, e-mail, telephone, texting, facsimile, and so forth; *manner* refers to whether the threat is directly communicated to the target or indirectly communicated; and *material content* refers to all material aspects of the threat itself, usually analyzable through the use of a forensic technology, such as linguistics, DNA transfer evidence, fingerprint evidence, graphic presentation, and so forth. This face-valid schematic has not yet been tested for any predictive or concurrent validity, but is an attempt to clarify terms often used to study such communications that are not mutually exclusive (e.g., conditional threat, veiled threat, direct threat) and have been inconsistently defined in previous studies.

The Children of Public Figures

As a final, but by no means secondary, concern, the inordinate interest in the children of a public figure also deserves attention from a problematic or threat perspective. Such inappropriate communications (i.e., frequent, long duration, bizarre, odd) to the minors of those who have attained fame usually arises from three psychological sources: (a) nonpsychotic transference—the shifting of emotions from one’s own children, or oneself as a child, or the absence of children, onto the offspring of the public figure; (b) psychotic transference—a delusional belief that the subject is related to or has an important role in the children’s actual lives; or (c) pedophilic interest—an almost exclusively male subject’s interest in the minors as sexual objects. There is no published research on this topic concerning the children of public figures, although there are many safety programs designed for all children who may en-

counter a relative or stranger with malevolent intent. There is at least one private study that has been completed related to crimes against children of public figures, but the findings of the study are unavailable.

This topic warrants careful and immediate study of these potential concerns and threats. Perhaps the most onerous threat toward the children of public figures is kidnapping. Although research in this area is dated, and no published research has focused exclusively on the children of public figures, there were 115 stereotypical kidnappings in 1999, defined as abductions perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance and involving a child who was transported 50 or more miles, detained overnight, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed. In 40% of these cases, the child was killed, and in another 4%, the child was not recovered. Two thirds of these stereotypical kidnappings were female victims between the ages of 6 and 14 (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002). Other studies involving large national samples have found that offender and offense characteristics in child abductions vary significantly according to victim age, gender, and race (Boudreaux, Lord, & Dutra, 1999); for example, sexual gratification is the most likely motivation for the stranger abduction of a girl aged 5 to 10. Time and distance intervals are also critical to case solvability in child abduction murders (Brown & Keppel, 2007). Most child abductions, however, are perpetrated by family members or close relatives (Boudreaux et al., 1999).

Future Operational Research

The map is not the territory. In other words, regardless of the elegance of a theory or the comprehensiveness of the data collection, research results will not exactly reflect reality. There will always be known unknowns, unknown unknowns, and most importantly, individual differences that are not captured by large group research, the cornerstone of social and behavioral science. Black swans will also appear on rare occasion—those events that are virtually unpredictable yet catastrophic (Taleb, 2007)—and challenge the historical beliefs and assumptions that have guided operational decisions, even when based upon a robust research program.

Research studies of those who problematically approach, escalate, and, in a few cases, attack public figures should utilize not only nomothetic (large group) data that have been randomly drawn from recent or current case management files, but also focus upon select cases and the individual differences that define them. Subjects of particular interest to law enforcement, security, and intelligence agencies because of their unusual or outlier behaviors could yield important data by being forensically evaluated with standardized tests and measures, if possible. Sensitivity to all forms of methodological challenges in the research (study design, measurement, confounding factors, other cognitive biases) should also be rigorously monitored to both minimize their impact on findings and, when unavoidable, set them forth as limitations.

The study of those who approach or attack public figures is a nascent science, but can bring an operational efficiency to those tasked with their protection. Research continues to refine our understanding of the interplay of protective intelligence gathering and personal protection, and contributes to minimizing the public figure's vulnerability to an attack. As we wrote a few years ago, the danger in many cases is quite real:

Disappointment or humiliation is the very predictable outcome when a public figure is pursued. The idolized figure is now beneath contempt. Yearning becomes disgust. Love may even become hatred. Rationalizations are put into place. Delusion may bring a resolve that is immutable. Aggression intensifies. Revenge is in the air. (Hoffmann & Meloy, 2008, p. 191)

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