

The Tamerlan Tsarnaev Case: The Nexus of Psychopathology and Ideology in a Lone Actor Terrorist

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This is a psychoanalytic case study of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the terrorist who bombed the Boston Marathon in April, 2013, with the help of his younger brother. The focus is upon the nexus between his psychopathology and ideology, in this particular case an arguable paranoid and psychotic disorder and his growing commitment to radical Islam, culminating in his identification as a jihadist warrior and a renunciation of Western ideals. The theoretical approach is both object relations and developmental, with empirical reliance on both primary and secondary source material, including the testimony of those within his family and social network at his brother's trial. The nexus of psychopathology and ideology in this case is the degree to which conspiratorial belief systems blaming, among others, an international Jewish conspiracy and a covert CIA program—which he found in both the virtual (Internet) and terrestrial (travel to Dagestan) worlds—helped alleviate the anxiety of a decompensating mind.

Keywords: terrorism, threat assessment, TRAP-18, psychopathology, mental disorder

While the historical view among experts has been that terrorists do not show any specific psychiatric or psychological abnormalities (Crenshaw, 1981, 1986; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006; Merari, 2010; Pape, 2005; Post, 2005, 2007; Sageman, 2008; Silke, 2004), recent studies of lone actor terrorists, but not group terrorists, have tended to contradict these views (Capellan, 2015; Corner & Gill, 2015, 2017;

Corner, Gill, & Mason, 2016; Gill, 2015; Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Gruenewald, Chermak, & Freilich, 2013; Hewitt, 2003; Lankford, 2012; Meloy & Yakeley, 2014; Misiak et al., 2019; Spaaij, 2010). Such work has resurrected interest in the psychiatric disorders and psychological factors, and by extension the psychodynamic hypotheses concerning the structure of personality and the course of life events, that may advance radicalization and pave the ways for terrorist acts. As Corner and Gill (2015) stress: “[In terrorism] Mental illness mechanisms remain unexamined in a systematic way, and there may be grounds to pursue a more concrete understanding of how mental illness and psychological processes influence an individual's participation in and trajectory through terrorist behaviors” (p. 24).

This is a psychoanalytic study of the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the elder of the Tsarnaev brothers who bombed the Boston Marathon on the 15th of April 2013. In the view of those familiar with the case, Tamerlan Tsarnaev was the one who instigated the Boston attacks (Bates & Nye, 2013). Tamerlan and his brother Dzhokhar can certainly be considered as lone

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actors because their actions were not directed by a terrorist organization, and they acted without orders whenever they followed Internet propaganda or received indirect support from friends (Stewart & Burton, 2009). We consider them an autonomous terrorist cell inspired by radical Islam, rather than supported or directed by a terrorist organization.

Lone actor terrorists represent a major risk and are very difficult to spot, hence the central hypothesis of this article: to demonstrate the need for threat assessment and management based on the identification of psychological factors, and to discuss the desirability of prevention policies that can evaluate and mitigate the formation of a “nexus of psychopathology and ideology”. Virtually all lone actor terrorist cases are framed by an ideology and between 26% and 41% appear to be affected by a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Corner & Gill, 2015, 2017; Meloy & Gill, 2016).

The phrase “nexus of psychopathology and ideology” was coined by Meloy and Yakeley (2014). It is one of the indicators in the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy, 2017; Meloy & Gill, 2016), defined descriptively as “mental disorder.”

Extant terrorism research has often formulated this debate as an either/or proposition, but this is likely a false dichotomy. As the content of delusions is often shaped by cultural and social forces (Suhail & Cochrane, 2002), “why is it not feasible that patently bizarre perceptions of reality, represented in various extreme belief systems, would not either rationalize and/or intellectualize, and therefore perhaps buffer against, the anxiety-producing internal experience of a decompensating mind (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014, p. 356)”?

By the phrase “nexus of psychopathology and ideology” we mean the myriad ways in which psychiatric symptoms of a mental disorder influence, and are influenced by a violent ideology. It is a functional and dynamic inquiry, which eschews the false dichotomy of a mental disorder or an ideology (Corner & Gill, 2015). Tamerlan Tsarnaev offers an exceptional opportunity to better understand this relationship in one particular case. Our study will first detail Tamerlan’s gradual process of radicalization, showing the events that triggered it, the roles played by his alleged religious mentor, and the materials he found on the web. Along each step

of this radicalization, we will examine the psychic mechanisms and psychopathological processes these imply. We will also analyze Tamerlan’s relationship to his parents and relatives, and especially his mother, as part of the elements which contributed to his radicalization and determination to become a martyr.

In conclusion, we will examine how the formation of the nexus of psychopathology and ideology could have been prevented, or at least monitored in the Tsarnaev case, and stress risk situations for such a formation. We suggest general threat management *prevention* policies, because *prediction* of a specific terrorist attack is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.

Method

In this article, we are not drawing on written statements by Tamerlan as there are none. Nonetheless the criminal investigation of the attack, and criminal trial of his younger brother, revealed Tamerlan had assembled binders, one containing Surahs (chapters in the Quran) and Hadiths (traditions containing sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad), another with articles on Jewish actors, and that he had underlined passages in some of his books. The analysis of these materials is part of our case study. The comments and behavior that we will refer to as being Tamerlan’s are for the most part quoted and corroborated by the cross-checking of sources, including statements made by witnesses under oath during the trial (trial transcripts). We also benefited from the help and accounts of someone who knew Tamerlan and was close to him and his family since their arrival in the United States. We refer to this person by J.H. and to the additional information and materials given by J. H. with the expression “personal communication” and the date of our conversation. We also used as secondary sources newspaper articles and two investigative journalists: One who knew the Tsarnaevs (Alan Cullison of *The Wall Street Journal*) and Christian Caryl who revealed the name of Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s alleged mentor. The data are interpreted utilizing psychoanalytic theory, specifically an objects relations-developmental approach (Jacobson, 1964; Kernberg, 1976, 1992). Psychoanalytic theory originated with the work of Sigmund Freud during the first half of the 20th century—his complete works are

available in a 23 volume *Standard Edition* originally published by Hogarth Press in London—and is fundamentally based upon the premise that mental life is both conscious and unconscious. In other words, there are many thoughts, fantasies, emotions, impulses, and psychological defenses of which we are not consciously aware at any given moment; and such internal “psychodynamics” influence our behavior. An object relations-developmental approach to psychoanalytic thinking emphasizes the mental representations that we have in our mind that define the self and others, and the relatively stable emotions or affects that color them, heavily influenced by our personal history and those with whom we have had a bond or attachment. For example, a young man may have been abandoned by his father as a child and raised by a mother upon whom he could not depend for love and safety. He would then form stable mental representations, or object relations, in his mind of others colored by his fear and anger that he could not trust anyone, and in extreme cases might develop a paranoid condition. The word “radicalization” in our case study has been widely commented upon and Githens-Mazer (2012) warned of the lack of conceptual clarity. Here we follow Borum (2011, p. 1) who defined radicalization as “the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs—as a precursor to terrorism.”

It is relatively easy to construct a linear and causal narrative of an individual’s psychology over time. It is likely to be clear and explanatory, but is often incomplete, and on occasion wrong. The reason is that psychological development and the psychodynamics of thought and emotion are nonlinear, often meandering, and sometimes incomprehensible when there is severe abnormality. A psychoanalytic case study is an exemplar of this process because it attempts to grapple with both logical and linear thought, as well as illogical and nonlinear unconscious processes that often dramatically affect the person’s behavior. Note the illogic of dreams, what Freud referred to as the royal road to the unconscious.

A psychoanalytic case study is often nonlinear, as this one is, as we attempt to grapple with the conscious decision-making, as well as unconscious dynamics when they can be inferred, and the ways in which we hypothesize they affected the behavior of Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

We do not attempt to describe just a linear narrative, and instead draw inferences from the disparate facts as verified by us, as well as discuss known areas of his internal life where reasonable inferences can be made. Because this is an indirect assessment (Acklin, 2018; Meloy, 2004) of the state of one individual’s mind over the course of many years, it is both highly inferential at times—we have noted this through the use of adjectives and adverbs that describe our tentative formulations—and undoubtedly incomplete.

The Boston Marathon Bombing

On 15th of April 2013, two pressure cooker bombs filled with nails exploded near the finishing line of the Boston Marathon, causing three deaths and hundreds of casualties among the spectators who had come to celebrate the sporting event and Patriot’s Day.¹ Three days later, a manhunt was launched to find two men who appeared in security videos (CCTV) carrying backpacks to the Marathon. Two Bostonians of Chechen origin, the Tsarnaev brothers, went on the run, killing a police officer and taking a car driver hostage; the latter managed to escape and gave the alarm. When confronted by the police who had tracked them down, Tamerlan, aged 26, the elder brother, was hit by several bullets and run over by the vehicle in which his brother was escaping; he died of his wounds on his arrival at the hospital. His younger brother, Dzhokhar, aged 19, was discovered on the evening of April 19 under the tarpaulin cover of a boat at the end of a driveway not far from the site of the shootout. He was charged on 30 counts, including the use of weapons of mass destruction to cause death, and was convicted and sentenced to death on May 15, 2015.

¹ Patriot’s Day is actually April 19, and celebrates the first shot fired by the colonialists against the British in the American Revolution in 1775. It is most ardently celebrated by right wing ethnic nationalists in the U.S., and was the date chosen by Tim McVeigh to bomb the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. The symbolism of this minor American holiday, however, has never been explicitly tied to the Boston Marathon bombing as a jihadist strike against the United States.

2004–2009: Ambitions and Realities, in Search of a New Identity

Tamerlan has been described as having several arrows in his quiver: A talented but eccentric boxer, he had hoped to be selected for the Olympic games, to go to Harvard, or to become a musician or an actor (Cullison, 2013d; *United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 50, pp. 80–89).

In 2004, 6 months after his arrival in the United States, he declared, “I like the USA [. . .] America has a lot of jobs. That’s something Russia doesn’t have. You have a chance to make money here if you are willing to work” (Sobey, 2013). Tamerlan obtained his high school diploma in 2006. He rejected the offer of his uncle Ruslan to help him with college near Ruslan’s home. In accordance with his mother’s wishes, Tamerlan stayed with his family in Cambridge, MA and enrolled in a community college program in accounting which hardly enthused him (J. H., personal communication, October 19, 2015). By this time, he had got into the habit of going out, drinking and smoking weed: “most of the time he was drunk, most of the time he was high” (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015), Day 50, pp. 87–89; 2015, Day 51, pp. 5–21.

Concerned about the behavior of her son, Tamerlan’s mother encouraged him to become more engaged in the practice of Islam and enticed a new convert to Islam, whose name was Misha, with the role of getting Tamerlan back on track (Cullison, 2013a; Suspect’s mother: ‘Misha’ devoted Muslim, 2013). Mikhail Alakhverdov, known as Misha, was at the time of the attacks a 39-year-old man, the son of an Armenian-Christian father and an ethnic Ukrainian mother, who had converted to Islam. Misha refused to confide publicly about the nature of his relations with Tamerlan, and was not prosecuted; he apparently played no role in the preparations for the attacks. We will return to the nature of his relationship with Tamerlan (Caryl, 2013a, 2013b). Between 2006 and 2007, at age 21, the first phase of Tamerlan’s radicalization began: the gradual passage from a personal loss of direction to the mutable religious and political radicalism of someone using drugs on a daily basis, the first confluence of a pharmacologically induced unstable mental state and extremist beliefs.

Two years later (in 2009), at age 23, Tamerlan was noticeably ambivalent about becoming American. He flaunted himself as fundamentally foreign and different. He described himself as very religious, and one senses a certain chagrin when he declared, “I don’t have a single American friend. I don’t understand them” (Hirn, 2010). Over a few years, a string of disappointments had initiated some kind of distrust in the United States. Yet at that time (2009), Tamerlan was still dreaming of entering the National Boxing Championships and being selected for the U.S. Olympic Boxing Team.

Deprivations and Frustration

Hamm and Spaaij (2015) stress the importance of a process of deprivation in the lone actor terrorist’s trajectory to targeted violence:

Lone wolf terrorism is caused by relative deprivation. In their social exclusion, lone individuals feel deprived of what they perceive as values to which they are entitled, and form grievances against the government responsible for their unemployment, discrimination, injustices [. . .] Personal and political grievances are important because they go to the crucial question of motives (p. 7).

The deprivation originated in two experiences which had a joint impact on Tamerlan’s commitment to radical Islam. First of all, deprivation resulted from a set of personal frustrations caused by the disparity between Tamerlan’s capabilities and ambitions, a failure to live up to his ego ideal (a mental picture of the ideal self), and between his capabilities and a lack of adequate recognition, a failure to be mirrored (admired and imitated) by others. Whatever people around him might have thought about his various talents as a performer, they did not translate into measurable social achievement. For example, Tamerlan was not permitted to join the high school jazz band to which he aspired (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 50, pp. 198–205, 2015, Day 51, p. 80). And, above all, although he had won two Golden Gloves boxing championships in New England, his hopes of becoming a member of the U.S. Olympic Boxing Team were dashed by the requirement for U.S. citizenship in 2010, even though he was a legal permanent resident,

Soviet born of Chechen and Dagestani heritage.

Second, it was said that Misha (the convert) prescribed for Tamerlan a path of deprivation, mandating that he turn away from his former ideals (playing music, being an actor, and boxing) in favor of a single objective: to be a good Muslim, filled with the presence of God and rejecting worldly temptations. In 2008, Misha allegedly said to Tamerlan that, “in Islam, hitting people in the head is not a good thing to do,” and similarly about music, “Misha said it’s not really good to create music. It’s not really good to listen to music” (Caryl, 2013b; *United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, p. 36).

These religious precepts gave rise to two internal processes: a search for his identity which was fueled by assertiveness, in being proud of one’s religion and origins; the other a sectarian move, in which his claim for identity was based on the rejection of the ideals and values of the people around him (Meloy, Mohandie, Knoll, & Hoffmann, 2015).

Radicalization: The Jewish Conspiracy

The sectarian trend engendered in Tamerlan by deprivation was strengthened by his Internet search for ideas with which he could identify. As his dreams of going to Harvard and of becoming a musician or an actor vanished, Tamerlan began to seek explanations of some kind. He read widely and explored the Internet, fixing on sites such as the Chechen “Kavkaz Center,” which was based on jihadist ideology (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 51, pp. 139 and Day 52, pp. 30–34). Then Tamerlan fixated upon conspiracy theory:

He [Tamerlan] did talk a lot about religion in general and particularly about conspiracy theory. He showed me some videos on the Internet about that stuff. He was hoping to find some books to read about conspiracy theory . . . It did seem that he had a goal to actually find out what is happening around the world, how it is connected with politics and how it is connected with big businesses and how—what place he has and religion has in all of that. He was searching for these kinds of things, yes (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, pp. 36–37).

In May, 2008, at age 22, Tamerlan watched the film *Zeitgeist*: “He was fascinated by it, he was beginning to think that all sorts of things were connected by a conspiracy of some kind”; “If you had a conversation with him, you’d get

the feeling that he was still searching, and I’d get the idea that he was going in the wrong direction” (Cullison, 2013c; Murphy, Tanfani, & Loiko, 2013). *Zeitgeist* (Joseph, 2007) is a film promoting suspicion of Judaism and Christianity which are portrayed as fraudulent accomplices of the political powers who are attacking impoverished peoples, third-world children, and in particular Muslim children, whom one sees on the screen and are victims of war.

The second part of the film maintains that the 9/11 attacks and other disasters were directed and orchestrated by the American government and its allies; they were also planning to control people by the subcutaneous implantation of an electronic chip which carried identification details. The cinematography and its messages consist first in producing an existential anxiety whereby the individual feels alone in the universe (deprivation), in order to promote a conspiracy theory which ties together numerous scattered facts and ideas, a clinical phenomenon called apophenia: the misperception of patterns and relationships where there are none. The film thus promotes the development of a “paranoid cognition” (Kramer, 1998) or “paranoid process” (Meissner, 1978). At the time when Tamerlan watched *Zeitgeist*, he was looking for *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Marsden, 1920). Tamerlan had noted a reference to *The Protocols* in a message from a Caucasian Islamist site that he downloaded before 2008, and he did acquire a reprint of an English edition (J.H., personal communication, October 23, 2015).

The Protocols describes a plot purportedly devised by Jews, in which the democratic institutions (parliamentary representation, the right to hold opinions or to publicly demonstrate) are portrayed as being totally manipulated by the authorities for their own treacherous ends. Tamerlan read and wrote notes on the book (Cullison, 2013c; J. H., personal communication, December 16, 2015) and from then on, the conspiracy theory supplied him with a reason for his failures in his student and professional life; at the same time it could offer him a role as a resistance fighter in a worldwide political and religious war. Two psychodynamics are notable here: first, the defensive use of projection and denial, attributing to forces outside the self entire blame for one’s social failures; and second,

a burnishing of one's depleted narcissism through the conscious identification as a soldier in a global movement, a grandiose fantasy maintained by the conscious cultivation of the self as a warrior (Belew, 2018; Gibson, 1994; Meloy et al., 2015).

2010–2013: From Warrior Fantasies to Terrorist Project

Tamerlan personalized the policy change that barred him from fighting in the National Golden Gloves championship in 2010. He thought the rule had been enforced that year to prevent *him* from participating, perhaps an idea of reference—when one experiences an unrelated event or mere coincidence and believes it is personally directed at him—an early symptom of psychosis for some. Although he had once been helpful and generous with beginners in the gym, he became arrogant and would disturb the training sessions. After 2010 he wore plainer clothes, let his beard grow, and performed his prayers in a corner of the ring. Moreover, he tried to talk about politics and religion all the time as if it was an “obsession or passion” (*United States v. Tsarnaev* 2015, Day 50, pp. 88–93 and p. 161): the emergence of a pathological fixation (McEwan, Mullen, Mackenzie, & Ogloff, 2009; Mullen et al., 2009) or an extreme overvalued belief (Rahman, 2018).² Three days before the bombings, he visited the gym with his brother, behaving in an antagonistic and disrespectful manner. When they entered the gym, the manager asked them to take off their shoes. Dzhokhar complied immediately with the request, but Tamerlan did not and began arguing with the manager, who would later describe him as “arrogant and selfish” and “extremely opinionated and outspoken about his Muslim religion.” Following this scene, the manager asked the owner of the gym to ban him, although neither brother ever returned (Feyerick & Levitt, 2013).

Tamerlan's personal grievance was joined with ideas of religio-political revenge on behalf of a suffering group, what Meloy and Yakeley (2014) called “moral outrage.” At the beginning of 2011, Tamerlan was looking for jihadist opportunities and wished to die for Islam. Tamerlan sent text messages and had a telephone call with his mother about his will to wage jihad. These messages and phone call were probably

the reason why Russian intelligence (FSB) reported to the FBI the radicalization of Tamerlan and his mother. He considered traveling to Palestine but renounced the idea as he did not speak Arabic. A call from the mother to his family in Dagestan also mentions Tamerlan's wish to fight as a jihadist (Chappell, 2013; *United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 52, p. 19).

The FBI began to investigate Tamerlan in March, 2011, and went to his home to question him; they closed the case 3 months later in June that same year (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 52, pp. 24–26; Deutsch & Chayes, 2013). On September 9, 2011, the decade anniversary of 9/11, Brendan Mess, one of Tamerlan's closest friends, was murdered in his home with two of his Jewish friends. The crimes were evocative of Islamic slaughters in that their throats were cut, they were nearly decapitated, and money was left behind. After the Marathon bombing, authorities alluded to the probability of Tamerlan's involvement due to forensic evidence at the scene and cell phone records that placed the brothers in the area; however, the Waltham triple murder remains an unsolved crime to this day (Rezendes, 2013). This may have been what Meloy characterized as “novel aggression”—a behavioral tryout—one of eight proximal warning behaviors in the TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2017).

In January 2012, at the age of 26—16 months before his attack—Tamerlan left for Dagestan, now a federal subject of Russia. He failed in his attempts to join a resistance group. Magomed Kartashov—the mother's second cousin who met with Tamerlan when he traveled there—was subsequently interviewed in Makhachkala, Dagestan, by FBI agents (the FBI 302, a standard interview reporting form, was partly read during the younger brother's trial). Kartashov declared to the FBI that “when Tamerlan arrived in Russia, he was already thinking about jihad and looking to do something. Tamerlan then asked Kartashov if he had any radical connections to Islam or contacts with people in the forest.” Kartashov who saw Tamerlan at least 15 times during his stay in Dagestan tried

² Extreme overvalued beliefs are not obsessions because they are welcomed by the individual and often consciously amplified as absolutely true and important (Cunningham, 2018; Rahman, Meloy, & Bauer, in press).

to stop Tamerlan, and they argued about religion and jihad. Kartashov said Tamerlan was not aware of the reality in Dagestan. Kartashov told the FBI Tamerlan told him he had radicalized online with Internet sites like Kavkaz Center and lectures from Anwar al-Awlaki (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 52, pp. 19–34).

When Tamerlan returned to the United States at the end of July, he continued to nurture his religious radicalism, feeding on videos and sermons he found on the Internet. He was aggressive toward a Jewish man he met at Starbucks in August (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 51, p. 132); there was an outburst at a mosque in December 2012, when Tamerlan opposed what the Imam was saying about how Thanksgiving could be celebrated by Muslims (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 52, pp. 17–51). Tamerlan had considered changing his Russianized surname (Tsarnaev) to Tsarni, a more Chechen version (*United States Intelligence Community*, 2014, p. 8). But on his return from Dagestan, he created a link on YouTube under the title of “Muazseyfullah”—that is, “the glorified—the sword of God”—finally revealing his choice of an Islamic identity and leaving little doubt about his intention to make himself a soldier for Allah. It was also with the name of “Muaz” (the Glorified) that he then signed his application for naturalization (Harding & Dodd, 2013; Serrano, 2014; Vizer & Bender, 2014). On Tamerlan’s computer, the FBI were to find post-it notes in Russian which were stuck on his screen and exhorted the reader to violence. “If Allah had so willed, he would have taken revenge himself, but he wanted to test some of you by other means; Allah will punish them through your hands” (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 51, pp. 56–7).

The “personal grievance”—a failure in work or love, accompanied by humiliation, anger, and blame—which triggered Tamerlan’s warlike and revengeful intentions is nonetheless encrypted in the target he chose to bomb: The marathon is the mythical, singular event which closes the Olympic Games, and it was indeed this Olympic glory from which Tamerlan believed he had been deliberately banned in 2010. Moreover, the terrorist project guaranteed him access to another path, the ultimate path to glory—martyrdom. In Tamerlan’s psychological turn toward terrorism, the megalomaniac aspect was just as powerful as the paranoid

aspect. These are internalized object relations which structure fantasies of being both adored (by Allah) and being persecuted (by the unbelievers). Tamerlan had learned whom to love and whom to hate. There is also the suggestion of regression: the defense of splitting is utilized, wherein internalized objects are either good or bad, and there is no tolerance, or even perhaps capacity, to perceive and represent the ambiguities of the world, to stay in the gray. Such polarized thinking is often regressive, yet correlates with a Manichean religio-political view of good and evil, the latter existing only outside the self (Meloy, 2018). Such thinking, common to all fundamentalist beliefs, is simple and easy, and can be quite comforting.

Psychotic Troubles

Occult Forces and Powers: Djinns and Demons

If Zubeidat, his mother, wanted her son Tamerlan to be more religious and to follow Misha’s advice, it was not only because he was spending his time drinking and smoking, but also because Tamerlan had told her “he felt like there were two people living in him” (Filipov, Jacob, & Wen, 2013; Reitman, 2013). Zubeidat did not take her son Tamerlan to see a doctor but thought religion could solve his problems. Thus, Misha who allegedly “claimed to be an exorcist who fights with demons” (Bates & Nye, 2013), treated Tamerlan to a series of part-religious, part-esoteric lectures: “they would discuss things like hearing demons talk and talking to demons, and to djinns³ . . . Misha was telling him in what cases it was possible to hear djinns and in what cases it was not possible.” These talks were about religion “intermix[ed] with politics and conspiracy theories and Satanism” (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, p. 34).

Misha played a significant role in Tamerlan’s initial turn toward religion. With Misha’s teachings, Tamerlan was about to create the idea of a God who encapsulated his feelings of strangeness and persecution. From then on, he thought of himself as being at the center of a conflict

³ Also known as jinns in Arabian and Muslim mythology, these are intelligent spirits of lower rank than the angels, able to appear in human and animal forms and to possess humans.

between divine and devilish forces (Caryl, 2013a, 2013b).

Voices and “Majestic Mind Control”

Whatever Misha’s religious education and treatment was intended to achieve, it could not stop the ongoing psychopathological process in Tamerlan’s mind which led him more and more to feelings of persecution and the hearing of voices, what is referred to as psychotic decompensation by clinicians. In 2008–2009, Tamerlan said to his girlfriend that “TV is a project of Satan” and he claimed “Satan sent us messages through commercial music” (Parry, 2013). In 2012, after he had returned from Dagestan, he spoke about someone who was inside him: “Someone is in my brain, telling me stuff to do” (Filipov et al., 2013). Tamerlan resorted to the idea of a conspiracy to explain his delusions and auditory hallucinations; he believed in “majestic mind control,” which is a so-called way of breaking down a person and creating an alternative personality with which the person must coexist. One can give a signal, a phrase or a gesture, and bring out the alternate personality and make them do things. Tamerlan thought someone might have done that to him (Filipov et al., 2013).

Majestic Mind Control, or “Monark Mind Kontrol,” was an actual CIA project that originated following the Korean War to test methods of mental manipulation (various forms of torture, electric shocks, and drugs). The program was formally closed down in 1988, but since then, ideas about plots of various kinds to resurrect the project have abounded, especially with Hollywood actors (Celebrities Under Mind Control, 2013; Hollywood Subliminals, 2012; Thomas, 1989). Tamerlan had once dreamed of becoming a well-known actor. He had tried an acting class but dropped it on Misha’s advice. Before 2009, Tamerlan had assembled a ring binder with “collected biographies of famous Jewish actors, and pages filled with racial theories purporting to explain why Jews were so successful” along with references to *The Protocols* (Cullison, 2013d; J. H., personal communication, October 23, 2015). At this time, Tamerlan might have believed that his path to fame was thwarted by, and under the control of a Jewish conspiracy. After 2010 and his visit by the FBI in 2011, Tamerlan’s conviction of a

Jewish conspiracy theory would be supplemented by the delusion of a CIA/MK conspiracy. The *content* of Tamerlan’s internalized persecutory objects (both conscious and unconscious representations) were coalescing around the Jews as the source of his occupational failures and the control of his mind by the CIA MK Ultra program. It appears that he experienced these as actual auditory hallucinations (perceived sensations when there are no external stimuli) and delusions (fixed and false beliefs), rendering him psychotic. Such symptoms were both personal and conspiratorially organized, within his mind but not of his mind. Projective mechanisms appear to have changed once loved, admired and idealized goals (being an actor, a champion boxer) into a persecuted and hateful internal experience (Freud, 1911; Klein, 1946).

From Mental Automatism to Ideological Paranoia

If we try to reconstruct a chronology of Tamerlan’s psychotic decompensation and radicalization—the nexus of psychopathology and ideology—three additional elements are apparent.

(a) Tamerlan was attracted (at least from 2007 onward) by occult phenomena, and was interested in “invisible forces,” hypnosis, and influence: “Mr. Tsarnaev underlined chunks of a speed-seduction course by Ross Jeffries, ‘How to Create an Instantaneous Sexual Attraction in Any Woman You Meet,’ including monologues to create an ‘incredible’ connection,” and an essay on hypnotism (Cullison, 2013c). This interest corresponded at that time to his feelings of strangeness, to a magical connection to the world, and to a wish to be all powerful.

(b) The comment Tamerlan confided in his mother about “two people in him” first suggested an inner and anxiety-based experience of psychotic troubles. Thereafter Tamerlan would articulate beliefs which indicated that he thought of himself as a victim of some external influence (feelings of persecution, a delusional belief in thought control): Tamerlan believed in demons and djinns, and was tempted by the exorcism that Misha was able to offer him. Undoubtedly it was during this period, toward

2008, that Tamerlan felt more clearly the existence of two people within himself.

(c) Tamerlan had auditory hallucinations (hearing voices which are not real) at least from 2009 onward, which would have taken a strongly persecutory and command form, that of a giver of orders.

A clinical picture of this kind was also described by the French psychiatrist de Clérambault in the early 20th century as a “mental automatism:” sensations of strangeness and hallucinatory phenomena (thought echoing, hallucinatory commentaries about acts, auditory hallucinations; De Clérambault, 1920/1992). Mental automatism may engender ideas of persecution, and persecution mania (paranoia), as a “superstructure” through which the sufferer subsequently interprets his “automatism,” as it becomes more and more severe and compelling. We can consider Tamerlan’s ideological paranoia as a psychodynamic which gradually (a) provided him with a cause for his failures in life; (b) gave him an explanation for his hallucinations and psychotic troubles; and (c) gave him an alibi to seek revenge and join a personal grievance with a political and religious cause.

The nexus between psychopathology and ideology in Tamerlan Tsarnaev was the degree to which a developing paranoid psychosis was consciously explained by his beliefs in occult forces, ongoing CIA conspiracies, Jewish conspiracies, and jihadism. The external reference points of others and their belief systems—now readily available on the Internet—helped modulate the anxiety of a decompensating mind, and appear to have been clearly welcomed as plausible reasons for his victimization. The evidence for his psychosis is found in the testimony of collaterals who affirmed his hearing of voices (auditory hallucinations) and his delusions (fixed and false beliefs), although such symptoms can only remain strong hypotheses without historical evidence of a clinical examination and diagnosis by a mental health professional.

Personality and Relationships

An Egocentric and Controlling Personality

Tamerlan was described as a charismatic young man. As an adolescent, he had chosen for

himself the nickname “the professor,” functioning as a role model and guide for his three younger siblings: two sisters and a brother 8 years his junior. This role was supported by his parents’ expectations, in accordance with Chechen custom. Tamerlan’s readings show he wanted to seduce others and have control over them, especially women. He overestimated his abilities and projected himself into a grandiose future without considering the difficulties he could face in fulfilling his dreams:

It was 2004, . . . he already had an outsize American dream. He planned to box for the U.S. Olympic Team one day, and he wanted to earn a degree, perhaps at Harvard or MIT, and to hold a full-time job at the same time so he could buy a house and a car (Cullison, 2013d).

One senses a megalomaniac and controlling side in Tamerlan’s personality, who also fed on the helplessness of others, or on the physical superiority he could bring into play. He had a childish fantasy of omnipotence which had never receded through repression, as usually happens in the emotional and relational development of a child.

As a young man, Tamerlan also fed off the admiration of others and could be amused by their distress; he once provoked panic in his girlfriend by making her believe he had HIV (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 55, pp. 12–13). Certain psychopathic aspects of his personality, including sadism, seem to underlie his megalomaniac predilections.

Tamerlan was also said to be arrogant, a show-off. He dreamed of becoming an idol, but his eccentricities could make the other boxers smile: “some fighters mocked him for his fancy clothes and for being so high on himself”; “nobody liked him . . . they thought he was too cocky and self-centered” (Murphy, Tanfani, & Loiko, 2013), “disdainful of all these other fighters” (Cullison, 2013a). Tamerlan’s tendency to overestimate himself diminished his ability to endure, learn, and recover from events which had wounded his narcissism. The one who declared he did not have “a single American friend” might have sometimes felt something of a mismatch between himself and others, between his dreams and his achievements, but what would he do with all this distress? Tamerlan’s radicalization—the framing of his troubles with extreme and paranoid beliefs—

would also be a way to heal his narcissistic wounds, his “loneliness and longing,” without having to feel responsible for his failures (Curtis, Willock, & Bom, 2012).

Family Dynamics and Divisions

Personality is a product of both nature and nurture. Tamerlan’s narcissism was constructed and reinforced by his relationship with his mother for whom he was a veritable demi-god, “handsome like Hercules,” his body was a “masterpiece” (“Tsarnaevs’ News Conference, 2013). The passionate charge, almost erotic, of this mother–son relationship was again seen in Tamerlan’s attitude in maintaining the role of a knight serving his mother, ever ready to defend her or to act as if she needed to be defended (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, p. 32). Zubeidat was an omnipresent maternal object, showing great affection for her children and in particular for Tamerlan, always on the phone to them (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 55, p. 46; Day 56, p. 31). However, she was also described “as wanting the attention and removing it from everyone somehow:” she could behave “as if she was the queen” (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 50, pp. 175–6). The narcissistic mother is both a source of unrealistic inflation and tormenting dependency for the son, often manifest in his difficulties emotionally separating from her (Greenson, 1968; Meloy, 1992).

Anzor, Tamerlan’s father, a former USSR boxing champion, was much more in the background than his wife; he was often silent, providing for his family through his work as a mechanic. Anzor appears to have suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of alleged captivity and torture in Central Asia. He may have had cognitive troubles as a result of boxing injuries (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, pp. 100–106). For a long time, Anzor’s family had regarded Zubeidat as an inappropriate mate. Zubeidat was from Dagestan, a neighboring Muslim country, and the question of Chechen identity, magnified by Anzor’s family from which she felt excluded, was to heavily influence her determination to claim a Muslim identity for herself and her children. In fact, it was a question of being registered as part of a glorious genealogical line that would lead Zubeidat and her son Tamerlan toward a

version of Islam at odds with that traditionally practiced in the Caucasus (J. H., personal communication, October 19, 2015).

Tamerlan’s Olympic dream was his family’s last chance in their hopes of rivaling the success of Anzor’s brother, Ruslan; Tamerlan, who was unconsciously invested with this mission, dreamed of himself as the hero and savior who had to efface 20 years of family misadventures. So Tamerlan was torn between, on the one hand, his mother’s wish for dazzling success, and on the other, the example of his father’s hard work and the effortful success of his uncles (Travis, 2013).

The Relationship to His Brother

Dzhokar had great admiration for his brother and would be loath to criticize him. Tamerlan’s friend and brother-in-law Elmirza Khozhugove described Tamerlan’s love for his brother, his interest in his academic achievements and life, yet his firm place in the family: “There is a saying we have in Chechnya which goes it, like is, in a family with seven sons, it is better to be a dog than the youngest son, meaning that the youngest of the boys is obliged to do the things that the other boys tell him. So he had to obey every order that the elder brother say, any of them” (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 56, p. 38). When Dzhokar would resist, Tamerlan would attempt to indoctrinate him (Wines & Lovett, 2013). When Dzhokar abused marijuana, Tamerlan would attempt to convince him to read more religious texts, as he had done previously in addressing his own alcoholic issues.

The Mother–Son Relationship: A Pietà Fantasy?

At press conferences after the death of her son, Tamerlan’s mother Zubeidat would perform for the photographers; they would continuously record her theatrical attitudes, in which she alternated between a sorrowful mother, and expressions full of anger and hatred when she threatened the United States with the flames of hell. She was described as suffering from verbosity and hysterical jubilation (*United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 51, pp. 165). The mother–son couple was indissoluble and the ideas of one were quickly

adopted by the other, especially the conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks (Warren & Boyle, 2013). Zubeidat herself had found in religion a new identity which caused her to put aside her sexy mode of dress in favor of the hijab (Kizler, 2013). She played a vital role in the radicalization of Tamerlan and supported his fantasies of combat and martyrdom; in 2011, as we have noted 2 years before the attack, they discussed jihad together and she sent text messages to her family in Dagestan suggesting that Tamerlan was willing to die for Islam (Deutsch & Chayes, 2013; *United States v. Tsarnaev*, 2015, Day 52, pp. 22–23). Zubeidat invested emotionally in Tamerlan as her ideal object, her warrior self object—an extension of whom she was; she was critical of and dissatisfied by her husband’s lack of success, and appears to have projected onto her son her own fantasies of glory. Zubeidat clearly voiced her admiration for the “warrior figure” (Cullison, 2013d) and for the practicing Muslim, whatever roles Tamerlan chose to embody. On his side, it seems Tamerlan was partially identifying with his mother, and showed, like her, an interest in his appearance and an eccentric sense of dress. In Dagestan, he chose to wear a long tunic and to use kohl make-up around his eyes, in keeping with jihadist tradition from elsewhere, but in total disregard for local customs (Cullison, 2013b; Filipov et al., 2013). Surrounded by police several days after the attack, Tamerlan phoned his mother: “The police have started shooting at us . . . Mama I love you” (Bates & Nye, 2013), as if about to die in her arms, creating an image of the pietá. We note here the observation Genet (1986) once keenly made to describe a young Fedayeen and his mother (Zulaika, 2009), as it seems something similar has also been observed about Chechen mothers with their boys (Kobrin, 2014). This deadly fantasy of a wounded child who returns to his mother’s breast perhaps explains Tamerlan’s fascination with the numerous photos of mutilated children found on his computer, and also with a photo in which he is seen brandishing a weapon when there is a child in the shade, as well as another in which a boy is carrying a gun. The closeness to the idealized mother is also evident among other jihadists as they use the soothing fantasy of the maternal object to

manage anxiety in the face of imminent death (Meloy, 2018). The pietá fantasy is a masochistic regression; in other words, psychological movement to a younger age wherein the boy suffers for his mother. Tamerlan may not have been able to escape the impingement of his mother’s desire for a heroic son. A regressive fantasy may have led him to a total submission to it, through his death as a jihadi, pierced by bullets from the unbelievers.

A Chronological Summary

The case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev helps us clarify a three phase dynamic in what Meloy and Yakeley (2014) call the “nexus of psychopathology and ideology.” The path followed by Tamerlan allows us to understand better, on the one hand, the role of radicalization in relation to the arguably psychotic disorder of Tamerlan; and, on the other hand, the evolution between the phase of radicalization and that of involvement in the terrorist project.

The Ideologically Paranoid Turning Point

At the end of high school, Tamerlan was a sporty young man who drank and smoked a lot; he also told his mother that he was suffering from hallucinations and feelings of strangeness (mental automatism). For these reasons, Zubeidat pushed her son toward religion. However, Tamerlan’s pathological structure of thinking led to an increasingly esoteric interpretation of religion and the world. He found material on jihadi websites which introduced him to the idea of a worldwide political conspiracy against Muslims. Not only did these materials of indoctrination echo Tamerlan’s inner growing feelings of persecution, but in addition, they provided him with explanations and reasons for his failures, underachievements, and difficulties in life. Meloy and Yakeley (2014) recognize the paranoid functioning as the most broadly shared among lone actor terrorists, and they detail a process very similar to that which we found with Tamerlan: “Here again, ideological commitment may have buffered the chronic presence of mental illness [. . .] Here again the nexus between ideology and paranoia is suggested as a dominant force outside the self and is perceived as attempting to

control his [the terrorist's] thoughts; this is linked to an esoteric belief system" (p. 360). Knoll and Meloy (2014) have also stressed the "violent paranoid spectrum" among mass murderers.

The Period of Warrior Fantasies

When Tamerlan lost his Olympic dream, his resentment likely reached its most intense level and turned into chronic narcissistic rage. His radical and anti-Semitic ideology helped him project this rage onto the political stage, and Tamerlan formed a desire to become a jihadist and die as a martyr. At the same time, Tamerlan's paranoid troubles increased dramatically: Voices were giving him orders and he may have been involved in the Waltham triple murder of his best friend and two Jewish boys (September 11, 2011). Six months later, Tamerlan decided to travel to Dagestan (January–July 2012), but could not find a likeminded group with whom to interact, which hardened his ideology.⁴

The Terrorist and Martyrdom Project

There is also a striking paradox when the lone actor terrorist becomes psychotic: Delusions remove any ambivalence concerning the developing motivation to carry out an attack, and bring a resolve and a commitment that may fuel both desire and accelerate a pathway to violence. This phase includes both the conceptualization and the implementation of the terrorist project. Tamerlan changed his name and decided he would kill in the name of God; he broadcast an "end of time" prophecy and exhortations to martyrdom, fully aware he would probably lose his life in his vengeful and redemptive action. Meloy and Yakeley (2014) add that ideological "moral outrage" can "serve as a defense . . . in some cases against psychotic decompensation" (p. 362). Tamerlan's thinking was filled with the radical religious and political ideas he had found on the web. This content helped him stabilize his psychotic disorder as the jihadi ideology gave him an explanation for his growing paranoid feelings. Moreover, this process likely fulfilled Tamerlan's narcissism and megalomania: once he had lost hope in his everyday life and did not have any more grandiose projects such as his Olympic dream, he would find a role in this political terrorist realm, and in

death take his place among the shaheed (martyrs) who preceded him to Heaven.

Narcissistic Rage: From Personal Grievance to Moral Outrage

Tamerlan could not reach the Olympic glory he was dreaming of, and we think consequently he bombed the Boston Marathon as an expression of his envy and rage against those who succeeded where he could not: "The desire and decision to commit a terrorist act are often motivated by a combination of personal grievance and moral outrage concerning particular historical, religious or political events. However, the moral outrage is often vicariously experienced, and not embedded in the personal history of the lone wolf (Sageman, 2008; Simon, 2013; Spaaij, 2012). These are processes of identification and projection" (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014, p. 352).

In considering this process, Meloy and Yakeley (2014) stress that lone actor violence "is a superego-driven homicidal aggression" (p. 362), in contrast to the valueless violence of the psychopath. We would add that the ideological homicidal violence in Tsarnaev and other lone actor terrorists like Breivik does not seem to be driven by an "oedipal" superego dynamic which would imply the ability to experience responsibility for one's failure and a sense of guilt, especially in actions such as killings. On the contrary, Tamerlan's predominant psychic functioning seems based on a "pre-oedipal" paranoid dynamic (Klein, 1946). When his ideal cannot be reached, Tamerlan does not feel depressed and responsible for what happened, but he is driven by persecutory feelings; he is full of a "narcissistic rage," he sees himself as a victim, and thinks he has an indisputable right to take revenge (Kohut, 1972; Strozier, Terman, & Jones, 2010).

Terrorists such as Ted Kaczynski, Anders Breivik, and Mohamed Merah have displayed the same psychological dynamics. Breivik was seeking revenge against the cultural Marxism and feminism he accused of having emasculated the Norwegian people; consequently, he attacked a summer youth camp of the Norwegian

⁴ Failure to affiliate with an extremist or other group is one of the distal characteristics of the TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2017), and appears to intensify the attachment to a radicalized ideology.

Labor Party. This ideologically framed motive was actually a projection of his personal grievances: when his parents separated, the guardianship of Breivik was given to his mother who, according to him, had feminized him. Kaczynski suffered from the fact he left his home and family to join a scientific program at university, and he then developed an ideology of his own, denouncing scientific progress and “technological slavery” (Kaczynski, 2016). Merah, who had not been accepted into the French army, decided to kill soldiers (Merah & Sifaoui, 2012). Thus, the lone actor terrorist’s crimes bear traces of his personal grievances and rage, and are driven by the need for *personal* revenge over a persecutory introject which has been actualized in the real world.

Fear of a Feminine Infringement

Meloy and Yakeley (2014) stress that there is a “failure of intimate sexual pair bonding” in most of the lone actor terrorists they studied. This hypothesis has been validated in subsequent studies (Meloy & Gill, 2016; Meloy et al., 2019). Anders Breivik, Mohamed Atta, Ted Kaczynski, Timothy McVeigh, and more recently, Omar Mateen, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, and Anton Petterson (Erlandsson & Meloy, 2018) seem to have oscillated between heterosexual, homosexual, and sadomasochistic experiences (Nice: Les auditions des amants et maîtresses, 2016). Although Tsarnaev did marry in 2013 before his death and had a child, his arrogant style—with silk scarf, snakeskin boots, tight leather jeans, and open shirts (Sontag, Herszenhorn, & Kovaleski, 2013)—suggests a narcissistic identification with the display of the feminine. He also slapped a previous girlfriend for wearing “western” clothes, and finally married another girl who converted to Islam and decided to wear the hijab. Men who have not completed the process of disidentifying with mother and become secure in their own masculine identity will continue to fear engulfment by any woman with whom they become intimate. Such fear is defended against with anger and the perception that she is trying to control him, and may result in domestic violence and demands for submission of her will (Dutton, 2006; Greenson, 1968; Mahler, 1963). Although it is tempting to attribute such behavior to only religious or cultural differences, such

homogenizing fails to account for the fact that individual psychology *always* mediates cultural expectations and interpersonal violence.

Gibson (1994, p. 38) wrote, “The lone wolf is reborn without a mother; separation from her and all young women is idealized (she is seen as a source of power if kept at a distance), and becomes a mark of maturity.” We would elaborate, in line with Ghent’s (1990) analysis of masochism, that the lone terrorist wishes he could be reborn without a mother, and wishes he could widen the differences between himself and women—but he fails to do so. Tsarnaev, like Atta or Breivik, was very close to his mother. Anders Breivik decided he would perpetrate a terrorist attack after he returned to his mother’s home. Thomas Mair hesitated between killing his mother or the MP Joe Cox. To perpetrate the Boston bombings, Tamerlan used an article published in the Al Qaeda magazine *Inspire* entitled: “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom” (Spencer, 2013). Tamerlan’s death was both a destructive and also a masochistic apotheosis, a last desperate effort to break away from a feeling of feminine infringement. Narcissistic mothers make it extremely difficult for their sons to disidentify with them due to their hunger for their son’s attention and admiration; simply their inability to “let go.” Such symbiotic anxiety does not dissipate, and often leaves the son, now an adult, with both a dependency upon his mother and a resentment of other adult women who attempt intimacy with him. Young male adolescents in search of a masculine identity can have great difficulties in coping with their repressed feminine tendencies or their feminine environment, and they wish they could be radically different from women. They also fear being considered as feminine and not strong enough among other boys; this fear if intense enough can initiate paranoid feelings and fuel a paranoid way of thinking (Freud, 1911; Greenson, 1968). They often remain yet in the mother.

Contributions to the Threat Assessment for Lone Actor Terrorism

Use of Lone Terrorists as a Strategy

Lone actor terrorism has become a popular strategy in some terrorist organizations. Several Islamist terrorists—Mateen (Orlando, FL), La-

houaiej-Bouhlel (Nice, France), Coulibaly (Paris, France), the Kouachi brothers (Paris, France), Abbala (Magnanville, France)—have seen their acts claimed after the event by terrorist organizations, usually Al Qaeda or ISIS. The media of these terrorist organizations praise the solitary mode of action and provide detailed instructions for building explosives with commercially available, over-the-counter materials in order not to attract the attention of the security services (Aboulenein & Fahmy, 2013).

The Al Qaeda magazine *Inspire*, which the Tsarnaev brothers used to help them build their bombs, praised Tamerlan and his mode of lone action after the attacks in Boston. On this occasion, the editors dug up photos of Tamerlan from the press and reproduced a text message he sent to his mother: “My dear mom, I will lay down my life for Islam, I’m gonna die for Islam, Inshaa Allah ” (The Battle of Marathon, 2014, pp. 50–52; Tamerlan’s Text Message to His Mom, 2013). Here we see how jihadist propaganda is based on mortifying psychological motives to stimulate the martyr-terrorist’s determination.

ISIS also uses the Internet to groom and exploit vulnerable young persons—those that are isolated and socially inept; those that sympathize with the plight of others in the Middle East; and persons suffering from mental health issues—all in an effort to encourage and incite lone wolf attacks in Western countries (Buggy, 2016, p. 1).

Counterterrorism Investigations and Psychological Threat Assessment

In an unclassified summary of the report issued by the Inspectors General of the Intelligence Services and Department of Justice (Unclassified Summary, 2014) we read about the conduct of the FBI in the assessment of Tamerlan Tsarnaev in March, 2011:

The CT [counter terrorism] agent did not take certain steps during the assessment, including contacting local law enforcement, visiting the mosque that Tamerlan attended, and conducting interviews with Tsarnaev’s wife, a former girlfriend he had been arrested for assaulting in 2009, or friends or associates . . . The CT agent did not wait to elicit certain information during interviews with Tsarnaev and his parents, including information about Tsarnaev’s plans to travel to Russia, changes in lifestyle, or knowledge or sympathy for militant separatists in Chechnya and Dagestan (Unclassified Summary, 2014, p. 9).

It is not apparent that a visit to the mosque would have revealed Tamerlan’s resentment and turn toward radical Islam during the 2011 investigation, but the interview of his former girlfriend whom he had assaulted could have revealed Tamerlan’s paranoid and psychotic troubles (as early as 2008 Tamerlan thought TV was a project of Satan, and was sending him messages about this). A visit to the gym where Tamerlan was training at that time could also have confirmed changes in his behavior as early as 2010.

Our remarks should be justifiably criticized as hindsight bias. No one can really know what would have been revealed by Tamerlan’s relatives of the changes which had happened in his behavior. Moreover, the FBI assessment was closed in June 2011, six months before Tamerlan’s departure for Dagestan, one year before he decided on his terrorist action, and several years after he had formed this nexus between his psychopathology and ideology.

At the time of the FBI’s assessment of Tsarnaev, a closer look at the relationship between his decompensating mental state and his radicalization may have been helpful. There is one central question in such cases: What is the relationship, if any, between this subject’s psychiatric status or psychological state of mind, and his radicalization? Case studies of the many ways in which various diagnoses could influence, and be influenced by ideology, could usefully detail a more granular look at such phenomena.

Religion as Psychiatric Treatment

As we have seen with Tamerlan, the role played by the environment and especially the family can be a key factor in the building of this nexus. Faced with his addictions, his idleness and his hallucinations, Tamerlan’s mother did not seek any help from the care services. This attitude is not exceptional in communities of Muslim immigrants where religion and traditional practices, sometimes embellished with esoteric beliefs, can be used as a means of “regulating” more or less severe psychological disorders. In the first author’s practice of psychotherapy with immigrant populations we have encountered this kind of case. For example, M., a young 23-year-old marijuana user had been plagued by violence since adolescence

and, one day after taking a drug, fell into a psychotic episode: “He was afraid of everything, was anxious, did not want to go out anymore, said he was seeing spirits, djinn, as they say at home,” says one of his relatives. The young man’s mother found someone at the mosque to practice “exorcism” which took place at home for a fee. After a number of rituals to “bring out evil spirits,” the exorcist announced: “We have understood that he was bewitched by four Jewish women.” Before the meeting with the healer, the young man was looking for content to explain his feelings of agonizing persecution but was still unclear. The exorcism session provided this content; it designated a persecutor who could take hold of the paranoid structure of thinking of the young man.

Mosques, or other places of worship, the family, or a friendly environment, can offer the services of healers, more or less well-intentioned, even radicalized themselves, and for whom fragile people are easy prey. Thus, Hakim Benchellali, sentenced in 2006 to 10 years in prison for having prepared attacks in France, and always driven by radical, conspiratorial, and esoteric ideas, tried to organize a seminar on the “roqya” after his release from jail. The seminar planned to introduce the world of the djinn and the demon’s hold, to initiate witchcraft, and to offer remedies and “care by prophetic products.” The conference was banned after being publicized (Val-d’Oise, 2014).

Several recent reports (Bakker & Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016; Buggy, 2016) concerning lone actor terrorists rightly point out: “Lowering barriers to mental health services is also important. Part of this effort should be focused on removing taboos on speaking about mental health problems in certain communities” (Bakker & Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016, p. 4). From the perspective of prevention, it seems necessary to create a better understanding of the risks related to the formation of this nexus between psychiatric disorder and ideology and develop better access to psychiatric care, in particular through dialogue with the religious communities which offer traditional care with esoteric dimensions: “There are many cases of lone actor terrorists of which their surroundings, in hindsight, had noticed certain behavior that should have been taken seriously” (Bakker & Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016, p. 3).

Clinical Thoughts

Even if the extreme ideology claimed by the lone terrorist is “often quite superficial: a cherry-picked cluster of prescriptive or proscriptive statements that provide a broad rationalization for the homicidal aggression” (Meloy & Yakeley, 2014, p. 352), sociologists, political scientists, criminologists, and even psychologists and psychiatrists can be dazzled by a logical and clear ideological discourse; especially when the terrorist is not known to have displayed any psychiatric troubles before his terrorist action, when this action has been prepared in great detail, has been carried out by ingenious and resourceful people, and was “successful.”

From a threat assessment perspective, mental health clinicians play a significant role in the management of this nexus. Meloy and Genzman (2016) recommend the following clinical steps: (a) Determine if there is a relationship between the diagnosed psychiatric disorder and ideology, with a particular focus at the level of symptom: Are there ways in which the symptoms of this mental disorder are motivating, facilitating, or disinhibiting movement of the subject down a pathway toward violence (Douglas, Guy, & Hart, 2009)? (b) Therapeutically manage the case with whatever treatment methods (psychotherapy, medications, etc.) are indicated and available; (c) Utilize collateral contacts with the subject’s permission to gather information on his behavior with family members, friends, and the larger community—recognizing that he may be immersed in a group which is promoting his or her radicalization; (d) Monitor the patient’s online behavior with the subject’s knowledge and permission; (e) Consult with a mental health professional from the same ethnic, religious, or cultural background so normative behaviors will not be grossly misinterpreted by the clinician. The mental health clinician must also judge when the subject poses a risk of violence toward an identifiable target, and engage law enforcement, knowing full well that such a step will likely preclude any further therapeutic work with the subject, and in the U.S. will immediately involve the FBI.

Threat assessment instruments such as the TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2017) and therapeutic modes of action must always take into account guaranteed legal freedoms—freedom of thought, freedom of belief—but must also be based on a

full and real reflection of normality and psychopathology. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the psychological deep structure of the lone actor terrorist (Meloy, 2018; Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, 2016, pp. 8–9). Where caregivers can see an attempt by police services to encroach on the physician-patient relationship and medical secrecy as evidenced, for example, by the recent debate in France between the Minister of the Interior and psychiatrists (Gourion, 2017; *Radicalisation et Psychiatrie*, 2017), the dynamics of the nexus tend to show that it is more a question of how a psychologically fragile person can be tempted and manipulated by a violent radical ideology (Channel, 2015).

Above all, detailed psychodynamic studies could clarify a set of psychic processes related to what we now call the nexus, its formation, its evolution, and its cultivation through different environmental factors (friends and family ties, situations of economic or cultural social exclusion, groups of reference points, meetings, websites, etc.). Such in-depth case studies are also essential for identifying and categorizing precisely the triggers that lead subjects, once a process of radicalization has occurred, to action.

Any psychological or sociopsychological support of radicalized people (particularly in the “deradicalization” programs that have been set up in Europe) could benefit from the knowledge gained from these case studies in an attempt to identify and monitor this nexus. Let us recall that psychodynamics, which makes it possible to understand cognitive, affective, and relational functioning, is most clearly elucidated by the case study, just like psychotherapeutic know how. We would also note that treatment of the nexus may be most successful through the use of psychodynamic psychotherapy, although such studies are essentially nonexistent. Research has demonstrated, however, that long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy is the superior treatment for complex personality conditions in terms of overall effectiveness, target problems, and personality functioning,⁵ such as the nexus we have discussed (Leichsenring & Rabung, 2008).

Not only are such case studies of lone actor terrorists too rare, but too little space is given to them in science journals, whereas the need for such studies is increasingly emphasized by specialists and actors on the ground: Bakker and

Roy van Zuijdewijn (2016) recommend the development of anonymized biographies to be used in training sessions with actors. Similarly, in their article on the evaluation of deradicalization programs, Horgan and Braddock (2010) conclude with a “reflection on case studies:”

Given the lack of detailed research on the underlying social and behavioral processes involved, it might appear premature to comment on the success of programs that in some cases appear to attempt to secure sustainable disengagement from terrorism, with or without the accompanying objective of achieving “de-radicalization” . . . Many programs appear threadbare with little if any cognizance of how behavior changes are obtained in other (e.g., criminal) contexts, and how those might inform the development of interventions for changing terrorist behavior. As a consequence, the skepticism that surrounds these initiatives is not only to be expected, but also welcomed (p. 279).

A recent study by Meloy (2018) as well as older studies including that of Robins and Post (1997), Stein (2002), Stern (2003), Strozier et al. (2010), or Volkan (2013) found among terrorists, violent fundamentalists, and their reference ideologies, the psychological dynamics and fantasies that we have highlighted here in Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Also, it does not seem chimerical to think that psychodynamics and psychoanalysis, if they are based on in-depth case studies, can garner very useful knowledge for the development of more consistent tools for the evaluation of radicalization and the risk of a terrorist activity. This knowledge could also help to define the issues involved in social as well as psychological follow-ups of many individuals who have been radicalized and convicted in terrorism cases.

Concluding Remarks

We consider the nexus of psychopathology and ideology a key dynamic in the mentally disordered lone actor’s radicalization process. In the case of Tsarnaev, his paranoid feelings were projected onto the outside world with the

⁵ With regard to overall effectiveness, a between-group effect size of 1.8 (95% CI [0.7, 3.4]) indicated that after treatment with long term psychodynamic psychotherapy (LTPP), patients with complex mental disorders on average were better off than 96% of the patients in the comparison groups ($P = .002$). According to subgroup analyses, LTPP yielded significant, large, and stable within-group effect sizes across various and particularly complex mental disorders (range, 0.78–1.98).

help of a radical ideology, and at one and the same time, anxiety concerning the onset of a mental disorder was reduced. Whether such a nexus will turn into radical violence or not is difficult to assess in any person of concern—people may feel themselves persecuted without any endeavor to get rid of the persecutor. The Tsarnaev case has allowed us to give a specific example of this dynamic, which certainly may vary and be highlighted by other case studies.

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