

In: J. Holzer, J.R. Meloy, E. Corner & E. Drogan, eds. (in press). Mental Health Aspects of High Threat Groups. Oxford University Press.

Extreme Overvalued Beliefs and Targeted Violence

J. Reid Meloy, Ph.D.

Tahir Rahman, M.D.

Abstract

Acts of targeted violence are preceded by the proximal warning behavior of fixation in 80% of cases. Fixation is an intense preoccupation with a person or a cause, which is also accompanied by deterioration of social or occupational functioning. The most common cognitive-affective driver of pathological fixation are extreme overvalued beliefs. In this chapter the authors explore the relationship between fixation and such beliefs, the psychiatric and psychological history of extreme overvalued beliefs, and their importance in contemporary threat assessment and management. Cases are utilized to illustrate such beliefs in mass attackers, public figure assassins, and lone actor terrorists. Extreme overvalued beliefs draw a common thread of thinking and emotion among those who carry out intended attacks following a significant period of research, planning, and preparation. Guidelines for clinical assessment and management are offered.

Key words: targeted attacks, fixation, extreme overvalued beliefs, mass attacks, terrorism

Manuscript

Introduction

Violent crime in the United States has been steadily decreasing for the past thirty years (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2023). Targeted attacks—acts of planned, intended violence—, however, have been increasing, particularly during the past two decades. Although there are many definitions of violence, and mass attacks in particular (see chapter by VanDercar & Resnick this volume), often leading to the confusion in interpretation of data, in this chapter we begin with the psychobiological distinction between predatory and affective violence. This line of research stretches back into the early twentieth century with the study of mammals which eventually included humans (Meloy, 2006), and is evolutionarily rooted in the need for survival: *affective violence* originates in the limbic system of the brain, and is a defensive mode of violence characterized by high levels of autonomic arousal, anger or fear, altered awareness, and is an immediate reaction to the perception of an imminent threat. *Predatory violence* is directed by the pre-frontal cortex, is devoid of autonomic arousal and intense emotion, involves planning and preparation, focuses awareness, and takes place in the absence of an imminent threat. Although both modes of violence are biologically distinctive—each one optimizes certain neuroanatomical pathways and neurochemicals (Siegel & Victoroff, 2009)—they find their evolutionary genesis in their adaptive advantage to help *homo sapiens* live another day. Affective violence wards off threats, predatory violence hunts.

Targeted violence is predation. It is less frequent than affective violence, but more concerning since it does not signal its imminency through behavioral changes such as skin flush, teeth and fist clenching, and muscular tension. Instead, there is a period of days, weeks, months, or even years when there is progression on a *pathway to violence* (Fein, Vossekuil & Holden, 1995). This movement has been studied over the past half century, and has defined the relatively new scientific discipline of threat assessment and threat management (Meloy &

Hoffmann, 2014, 2021). It initially emerged to solve a vexing problem: how do we prevent attacks on public figures which are infrequent but often catastrophic, such as the assassination of the President of the United States (Fein, Vossekuil & Holden, 1995)? The field of threat assessment and management broadened to both study and operationally mitigate the risk of targeted attacks in schools, corporations, universities, and other public and private venues; and is now advanced in recommended national policies and procedures by federal agencies such as the US Secret Service, the FBI, and the Dept of Homeland Security. Approximately half of the United States now legally mandate threat assessment and management teams in either secondary or higher educational settings, although fidelity of implementation is always a concern.

Proximal Warning Behaviors

A more granular area of study in this field has been the warning behaviors that precede targeted attacks, specifically the investigation and validation of proximal warning behaviors: patterns of accelerating risk that portend such an event (Meloy et al., 2012). Over the past decade, eight proximal warning behaviors—pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, last resort, and directly communicated threat—have been validated as a typology for the assessment of such high or imminent risk for a targeted attack (Meloy, Hoffmann, Bibeau & Guldemann, 2021). Among these proximal warning behaviors, fixation has emerged as usually the first to appear in a targeted attacker (Meloy, Goodwill, Clemmow & Gill, 2021), and is defined as an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause, accompanied by a deterioration in social and/or occupational functioning (Meloy et al., 2012; Mullen et al., 2009). Research subsequent to its formulation has found that fixation is present in 81% of targeted attackers in an aggregated data set of 377 cases (Meloy & Rahman, 2020).

Although fixation alone does not predict a targeted attack, it is a strong correlate of such risk. Several examples of fixation include John Hinckley, Jr.'s preoccupation with the actress Jodie Foster prior to his attack on President Ronald Reagan in 1981; and Timothy McVeigh's preoccupation with the US Government as his enemy following the conflagration of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in April, 1993, and his subsequent bombing of the federal Building in Oklahoma City exactly two years later. But what drives such pathological thinking?

Extreme Overvalued Beliefs

We have found in our research that there are three principal cognitive-affective drivers of fixation: obsessions, delusions, and extreme overvalued beliefs (Meloy & Rahman, 2020). Mental health clinicians will be familiar with the first two, yet extreme overvalued beliefs may be new conceptual territory, and is the most common cognitive-affective driver of pathological fixation. An extreme overvalued belief is shared by others in a person's cultural, religious, or subcultural group. The belief is often relished, amplified, and defended by the possessor of the belief and should be differentiated from a delusion or obsession. Over time, the belief grows more dominant, more refined, and more resistant to challenge. The individual has an intense emotional commitment to the belief and may carry out violent behavior in its service. The belief becomes simplistic, binary and absolute. Mullen and Linscott (2010) found that a gradual onset also characterizes extreme overvalued beliefs.

Extreme overvalued beliefs are composed of the interplay of both emotions and cognitions. The Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, again provides a cogent example. In the spring of 1993, the FBI/ATF attempted to confiscate weapons at a compound in Waco, Texas, which was the long time home of the Branch Davidians, a radical arm of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. At the end of the siege which lasted for 51 days, the FBI/ATF attempted to

forcefully enter the compound, resulting in fires which consumed the buildings and killed 76 people. Although there was no forensic evidence that the fires were deliberately set, McVeigh concluded that the federal government intentionally murdered the men, women, and children (first author's case files). This was a belief that was also quickly adopted by the Patriot Movement, an active and militant arm of anti-government political extremists during this period in the United States (Belew, 2018). The belief is binary, simplistic and absolute: the federal government is our enemy, they committed murder, and that is the truth. The facts on the ground were much more complex: the victims died of the smoke and fire as well as some had gunshot wounds to their heads, and the fires appear to have begun due to combustible material within the compound interacting with the tear gas utilized by the government vehicles.

In the case of an extreme overvalued belief, however, the details don't matter. The shades of gray of reality yield to black and white thinking, and questioning of the conclusion is heresy—often punished by exclusion from the group that shares the belief. This was McVeigh's central extreme overvalued belief that motivated him to carry out the bombing exactly two years later.

The emotions that surround extreme overvalued beliefs also warrant attention. Although there is as yet no formal research on such states, it appears from our forensic experience that the emotions are both positive and negative; for example, another contemporary belief is called the Great Replacement. Held by white supremacists primarily in North America and Europe, this theory asserts that there is an active conspiracy, orchestrated by Jews, for people of color to eliminate the global white "race" through higher birth rates, a slow-motion genocide. It is simplistic, binary, and absolute, and shared by thousands (see the website stormfront.org). The negative emotional valence is both fear and outrage that another group poses an imminent existential threat. The positive emotional valence is the excitement of

the call to arms, connection to other likeminded individuals, and sense of omnipotence that we can and will “fight and die” for our cause. In fact, there are now a few studies which have mapped the functional neurobiology of a “willingness to fight and die” in the context of extremist sacred values through the use of fMRI (Hamid et al., 2019; Pretus et al., 2019). These studies suggest that costly sacrifice may not be mediated by more rational cost-benefit analyses.

A Brief History of Extreme Overvalued Beliefs

The construct of extreme overvalued belief (EOB), which was refined and validated from earlier work by Wernicke (1906) and McHugh (2006), is the primary cognitive-affective driver for fixations that result in targeted attacks (Meloy & Rahman, 2020; Rahman, 2018; Rahman, Xiong, Resnick et al., 2018; Rahman, Meloy & Bauer, 2019; Rahman et al., 2020).

The German neuropsychiatrist Carl Wernicke (1906) was the first to describe and delineate “overvalued idea,” which he argued was not exculpatory for insanity. Similar to the French term, “*idée fixe*,” which originated at the beginning of the nineteenth century in connection with monomania (Goldstein, 2002), Wernicke argued that it was possible for any belief to become overvalued, and that the individual usually has an intense emotional experience that starts or reinforces the belief over time. For instance, a subject with a personal grievance—usually composed of loss, humiliation, anger and blame—who feels angry and alienated from society, might become a conspiracist. Such behavior might help to initially decrease his anxiety and mitigate his depression as his new apophenic orientation becomes a source of clarification and inspiration, and he finds those who believe as he does among the many online conspiracy groups. He may initially believe he is a victim like others whom he meets online, but over time this preoccupation becomes a new and dark self-identity wherein

he believes he is now a soldier or warrior for his particular cause (Meloy et al., 2015). Anders Breivik, studying the 12th century Knights Templar order—the tip of the spear of the Christian Crusades—came to believe he was a contemporary incarnation of a Knight Templar, and even designed his own uniform from material he purchased online before he carried out a mass attack in Norway, July 22, 2011, and claimed 77 lives (Meloy, Habermeyer & Guldemann, 2015; Rahman, Harry & Resnick, 2016). One of his central extreme overvalued beliefs was simplistic, binary, and absolute: Muslims were invading Europe, the continent then referred to as “Eurabia” by white supremacist groups. The data are more nuanced, and indicate that the Muslim population in Europe is expected to rise from 4.9% to 7.4% by 2050 (Pew Research Center).

Sims’ guidebook, Symptoms in the Mind (Oyebode, 2008), as well as the Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry (Gelder, Gath & Mayou, 1989), are two examples of British publications which prominently feature overvalued ideas as psychopathology. These texts categorize the following conditions as disorders with overvalued ideas: anorexia nervosa; paranoid state, querulous or litigious type; morbid jealousy; hypochondriasis; dysmorphophobia; and parasitophobia (Ekbom’s syndrome). By contrast, the DSM-5-TR and American texts place many of these disorders under delusional disorder (with subtypes of erotomanic, grandiose, jealous, persecutory and somatic) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Thus, major categorical disparities are present in the American vs British lexicons. True delusions are generally unshareable and associated with the psychotic organization of personality (Kernberg, 1975), while overvalued ideas are shareable and occur in an intact personality without such disintegration (Fish, 1964). True delusions may also be related to acute psychosis in mood disorders or neurological disorders, such as delirium, which are not related to overvalued ideas.

Wernicke first applied the term overvalued idea to describe the motive for Rodion Raskolnikov's murder of an elderly pawn broker in Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*. Paul McHugh, the former psychiatric chair at Johns Hopkins Medical School, subsequently applied overvalued ideas as the motivation for terrorism in the wake of 9/11 and the Unabomber attacks. He also asserted that Adolf Hitler, Carry Nation and John Brown held overvalued ideas leading to their violence (McHugh, 2006).

Pathways to Violence

The pathway to violence is emblematic of a targeted attack. Studied over the past half century, individuals move on a relatively predictable pattern that often begins with a personal grievance, and then moves to a fixation on violence as the solution to the "problem," proceeds through research, planning, and preparation, and culminates in an attack (Fein, Vossekuil & Holden, 1995; Calhoun & Weston, 2003, 2016; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021). However, the details of each pathway are different, and *equivinality* is prominent: different events, processes, or sequences of behavior can lead to the same outcome, a targeted attack.

Discerning these pathways can be difficult and time consuming, but the common cognitive-affective driver is often an extreme overvalued belief(s) that compels the fixation. There are, however, two typical pathways when lone actors are contrasted with groups. The cases presented here provide a synthesis of extensive scholarship including historical, legal and scientific reviews done by others. Our aim is to sharpen the clinical skills of threat assessment and management teams and to provide the legal system guidance regarding *ideological framing* (Meloy, 2017) and the cultural underpinnings of extreme overvalued beliefs.

Culture and the Lone Actor

A significant proportion of lone actors have a diagnosable mental disorder (Gill et al., 2021). This does not necessarily deter their ability to carefully research, plan and prepare for an attack. The paradox is that a lone actor motivated by a delusion may find a commitment and resolve that would be absent if the delusion were not present. The torment of anxiety and ambivalence would be obviated by the certainty of his cause. Daniel McNaughton's delusional beliefs that crews of spies were tormenting him culminated in his 1843 failed attack on Prime Minister Robert Peel. The British *McNaughton Rules* greatly influenced American law (Venn, 2024).

The Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy, 2017) was developed by the first author to assess the threat of a lone actor attack and has been found to be both reliable and valid (Allely et al. 2021). As clouds darken on the horizon, the lone actor will typically develop a moral outrage along with his personal grievance, frame it with an ideology—today such a belief is often a mishmash of various thoughts and is referred to by the threat assessment community as “salad bar” or “copy paste” beliefs—and use the internet to both cultivate contacts with other true believers as well as skill building of the means by which he intends to carry out his attack (Gill, 2015). Lone actors are autonomous in their pathway behavior, but research has shown that they are often embedded in an online network or *digital subcultures* which provide inspiration from other attackers that have preceded them (Rahman & Abugel, 2024). One common pathway is rejection by a group to which they want to belong, hardening their beliefs and accelerating their risk for violence. Another tributary is pathoplasticity (discussed later) and the personalization of the imminent, existential threat that their group is convinced will soon happen.

Proximal warning behaviors can signal intent and mobilization for an attack (Meloy et al., 2021). Sometimes the motivation is fame-seeking. Mark David Chapman could not be John

Lennon, but achieved notoriety for being his killer. Thus, cases must be viewed through both a subcultural and archetypal prism. We use archetype to refer to an original or universal model from which all things of the same kind are copied. Shifting waves of political and popular culture often form the pathoplastic *content* of extreme overvalued beliefs (Rahman & Abugel, 2024); while archetypes, which Jung (1947) believed are held in the collective unconscious, have a *pathostability*. Examples from literature and film would include the Hero, Outlaw or Villain archetypes.

Case Example 1: John Hinckley, Jr. was envious of his siblings—they were honored by his family with large oil paintings. Hinckley, meanwhile, struggled in life and sought fame in extreme ways (he once tried to meet a Nazi leader and also stalked President Jimmy Carter). He eventually began to relish in his affection for a beautiful, blue-eyed young actress, Jodie Foster. Instead of developing real relationships with women, he became inspired by Foster's part in the movie *Taxi Driver* in which she played a young prostitute. His beliefs that they were destined to be together grew more dominant, refined, and resistant to challenge. Despite the knowledge that they could never be together, he held an intense emotional commitment to be with Foster. His extreme overvalued belief was that he had an emotional connection to Foster, a common belief known as a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and he acted violently by attempting to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to ensure its legacy—which in fact he did (Meloy, 1989).

Hinckley told the prosecution expert Dr. Park Dietz, "Well, it is a combination of things: to impress her, almost to traumatize her. That is the best word. To link myself with her for almost the rest of history, if you want to go that far." Dr. Dietz believed that "Hinckley reveled in the memory of being transported by well-armed U.S. Marshals in a helicopter." He was featured

on the cover of Newsweek, rewarding his effort. He told Dietz, “I got everything I was going for.” He fantasized about being famous. In fact, so famous that he would be elevated to a glamorous level that would enable him to be with Foster. Meloy (1989) described two forms of erotomania, and used the Hinckley case to illustrate. The clinically accepted delusional erotomania, in which patients believe that another person is in love with them (which Hinckley did not); and borderline erotomania, in which no delusion is present, yet there is an extreme and overvalued disorder of attachment in the pursuit of, and in the potential for violence toward, the unrequited love object, in this case Ms. Foster. Nevertheless, a federal jury found Hinckley not guilty by reason of insanity—largely because federal law at that time required the prosecution to prove that Hinckley was sane beyond a reasonable doubt, an almost impossible task. This was especially true given the fact that he wrote a love letter to Foster before his attack stating, “Jodie, I would abandon the idea of getting Reagan in a second if I could only win your heart and live out the rest of my life with you.” His final words showed his fixated resolve, “This letter is being written only an hour before I leave for the Hilton Hotel. Jodie, I'm asking you to please look into your heart and at least give the chance, with this *historical deed*, to gain your love and respect” (emphasis added). After decades of inpatient observation, experts now cast doubt on whether he held psychotic delusions, and instead emphasize his self-absorbed, archetypal drive for celebrity status. The most consistent diagnosis he carried throughout his three decades of hospitalization was narcissistic personality disorder. John Hinckley, Jr. was granted unconditional release in 2022, and now resides in Williamsburg, Virginia. He maintains a YouTube channel for his music, and currently has 40,000 subscribers (all direct quotes from the trial transcripts in Low, Jeffries & Bonnie, 1986).

Case Example 2: Outwardly appearing to be a stable, married man, Lee Harvey Oswald had a long history of character and temperamental problems resulting in tumultuous work, military, and social problems-- as well as self-injurious behavior. Like Hinckley and Chapman, Oswald also sought fame through a grand historical deed. Oswald was quite adept at gaming the system and deceiving others. At age 15, he discovered socialist literature after a group of women handed him papers protesting the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage. The couple were portrayed as victims of an unjust court verdict. This happened around the time the impressionable boy had his own legal problems for excessive school absences and for being beyond the control of his mother (Bugliosi, 2007).

While in the military, fellow Marines nicknamed him "Osvaldovich" because of his excessive complaints about capitalism and fixation on Karl Marx. They also believed that Lee *purposefully* shot himself with a Derringer .22 caliber handgun in order to avoid orders to leave Japan with his unit. Oswald claimed this injury was an accident. His hatred for the U.S. grew stronger, so he eventually defected to the Soviet Union. The KGB were not welcoming and eyed him with distrust. On October 21, 1959, Oswald, still stubbornly refusing to leave, was found bleeding and unconscious in a Russian hotel room bathtub after he had slashed his wrist. The Russians let him stay but monitored him. He eventually married Marina. He grew tired of the Soviet system, failed to affiliate with it and moved back to the U.S. This time Oswald espoused extreme leftist subcultural beliefs seen in the 1960s. Rahman & Abugel (2024) have recently published an extensive TRAP-18 analysis of Oswald as an interactive student teaching case at Washington University medical school in St. Louis. Most of Oswald's concerning conduct was not known to authorities. However, Rahman argues that Oswald's failure to affiliate with the

Soviet Union may have flagged him as a terrorist threat upon his return to the United States. The TRAP-18 proximal warning behavior of *failure to affiliate* was not known in 1963.

Oswald relished, amplified, and defended his extreme political philosophy throughout much of his adult life. After attempting to assassinate General Edwin Walker (*novel aggression warning behavior* on the TRAP-18), a bigger target captured his attention—President John F. Kennedy. Oswald was staying in a rooming house while his wife was living in a separate dwelling. The two had not been getting along, and she refused to take him back. Oswald desperately tried to reconcile with her by giving her a kiss, which she refused twice. On a third attempt, he went so far as to block her from leaving the bedroom. She kissed him only to comply with his manipulative demand. With the presidential motorcade arriving the next day, Oswald's thinking became increasingly binary, simplistic and absolute. His decision to transform himself into an archetypal "great hero" crystallized. On November 22, 1963, Lee left the gold wedding ring he purchased in Minsk for Marina in a cup on the dresser in their bedroom—a symbol of his triggering event and desperate *last resort warning behavior* on the TRAP-18 (Rahman & Abugel, 2024; Meloy, Amman, Guldemann & Hoffmann, 2023).

Group-based Pathways

Terrorists embedded in a group and directed by a group are no more or less mentally ill than the general population (Gill et al., 2020). A well-run terrorist organization will have a hierarchical, often paramilitary command and control structure with positions assigned to those most capable of carrying out specific tasks (Bergen, 2011; Corbin, 2002). No one who joins a "terrorist" group refers to it as such, although those who militantly oppose such a group will find the label of "terrorists" fits quite well. The group's dependence on historical circumstance

is evident, and Rapoport (2022) has traced the details of many such groups in his masterful account of the waves of global terrorism from 1879 to the present.

A more mutable and volatile group-based phenomenon is what Amman and Meloy (2021) call *poliregression* (see chapter this volume). It is the regression seen in a large unstructured extremist group that may lead to violence, and begins with the elements that define such a group. Berger (2018) noted that two beliefs are necessary for a group to become extremist: first, the group must believe that an outgroup poses an imminent, existential threat to their survival; second, the group comes to believe that hostile action is necessary toward the outgroup to ensure their survival. In this cauldron of anger and fear walks a charismatic leader who shapes such intense emotions, often a psychopathic individual (Wallenborn & Meloy, 2024) with the skill set to intensify such feelings, further subject to the *poliregression* that occurs within any large unstructured group that is stressed and strained (see Amman & Meloy chapter this volume).

Case Example 1: The January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol is the most vivid example in modern times of *poliregression*. The gathering on the Washington Ellipse began as a political celebration in the morning with 53,000 in attendance (House of Representatives data), and over the course of several hours a volatile and dangerous mob emerged and marched. They easily breached the security surrounding the Capitol, and once within, at least 1400 individuals carried out acts of personal and property violence and have been federally charged; 900 have been convicted as of August, 2024. Subsequent appeals have limited some of the federal crimes that could be litigated, and President Donald Trump pardoned all those charged and convicted on January 20, 2025. *Poliregression* did occur, but those who assaulted the

Capitol building and committed crimes represented at most 3% of those assembled on the Ellipse. Nevertheless, 174 police officers were injured, and at least six people died within two days of the assault. Out of this display of mostly *affective* violence toward person and property, a much smaller contingent of young men, members of the Oathkeepers and the Proud Boys, planned, prepared, and intentionally engaged in *predatory* violence. Subsequent criminal charges against this group, numbering less than a dozen individuals, were distinguished from the other crimes by centering on seditious conspiracy (18 USC Section 2384). Stewart Rhodes, the founder and leader of this extremist group, was eventually sentenced to 18 years in federal prison, but he was also pardoned by President Trump.

Pathoplasticity

The cognitive definition of an extreme overvalued belief is centered on *form*—simplistic, binary, and absolute. It is evidence of *pathostability*. However, the *content* of any EOB is heavily determined by the social and subcultural milieu that shapes the behavior and psychology of the individual. Wernicke (1906) commented that an affect or series of affect-laden events were important in the development of “overvaluedness” which may lead to the development of an extreme overvalued belief.

Pathoplasticity refers to interactions of culture, personality, and life experience aspects of psychopathology seen in EOBs. It highlights how EOBs of the same content lead to vastly different behavior in different people. Culture can include many aspects of customs, religion, way of life, norms, prayers, rituals, music, art, sports, literature, theater, and films. The American Psychological Association defines culture as, “the values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions and other behaviors that are passed from one generation to another within any social group” (APA Dictionary, 2023). Culture can also include archetypal themes at a deeper, and

more collective unconscious psychological level, such as lover, hero, outlaw, celebrity, motherhood, martyr, savior, royalty, caregiver, sick role, fame, notoriety, winner, loser, and distrust of authority. Overvalued ideas in any of these domains can spawn unique mental maladies: eating disorders, multi-level marketing scams, hypervitaminosis, televangelist donations, pathological jealousy, vexatious litigants, sick roles, hypochondriasis, gender dysphoria, body dysmorphic disorders, hoarding, excessive body building (bigorexia), jinn or demonic possession, and for this discussion, targeted violence stemming from extreme overvalued beliefs. Carl Jung very well understood this concept, describing archetypes as exerting such a strong influence on a person that they could seemingly “take over” their life and determine their actions and choices (Jung, 1952/1956). Such archetypal drives are often fueled by Thymos or Thumos, first described by Plato (2007) as the universal human drive for recognition, dignity, justice or respect.

As an example of archetypal themes shared by many, Hinckley targeted President Reagan to be with Jodie Foster. This appears delusional at first. However, the cultural archetype of being romantically involved with an iconic movie star is shared by millions of admirers. Another cultural phenomenon is seen in “outlaws” such as Bonnie and Clyde, Jessie James, Carry Nation, John Brown, and Charles Manson.¹ They are examples of an archetype sensationalized in books, movies and plays. Many school shooters also belong to this “outlaw” archetype. Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wanted to top McVeigh’s bombing attack. Their attack has inspired numerous other attacks such as Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho, Sandy Hook elementary school shooter Adam Lanza and Nashville shooter Audrey Hale. Another example is the overvalued archetype of motherhood. The death penalty was given to

¹ Manson would be considered a fanatical psychopath (Schneider, 1958), and has recently been subject to a detailed clinical and forensic study of his personality, psychopathology, and ideology (Roy et al., 2022).

Lisa Montgomery after she was convicted of murdering Bobbie Jo Stinnett and abducting her newborn for herself. Montgomery fantasized about being pregnant and even bought maternity clothes and lied to her husband about being pregnant (Welner, Burgess & O'Malley, 2024).

Extreme overvalued beliefs often appear delusional to outsiders, but are not part of a psychotic mental disorder and are perceived as normal by the individual. They are best understood through a person-centered approach that is embedded in a social milieu. For example, Lee Harvey Oswald's interest in the Rosenberg's² trial and execution occurred during a time Lee may have felt victimized by the juvenile courts. This emotion laden event had a profound effect on the development of his adolescent identity, which later crystallized as a victim of "society's failed system." This helps us understand his discontent with American capitalism (being teased as "Osvoldavich" by fellow Marines), then the Russian system, and once again the American one.

Hinckley's defense attorneys concluded their insanity defense case by playing the movie "Taxi Driver" for the jury. He relished Jodie Foster's role as Iris, a 12-year-old child prostitute by watching the film nineteen times. Such ideas and symbols of erotic sexuality are most exciting in a concentrated, extreme, and detached form (Meloy, 1989). The pathoplastic features of Hinckley's beliefs are perhaps best understood by his own poem, "Fantasies become reality in my world" (Meloy, 1989).

The theoretical bridge between the intrapsychic and the social in psychoanalysis is object relations theory. A prominent theory over the past half century, object relations focuses on the internal representations of significant objects in the patient's life, which may range from early parental figures to later ideological devotion and the fashioning of a new, dark self-identity

² Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of spying against the United States for the Soviet Union, and were executed at Sing Sing Prison in 1951.

that may herald a targeted attack (Meloy, 2017). The theory provides a coherent and comprehensive means to understand within the patient the relationship between personal and cultural identities (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Summers, 1994).

Risk Management

The fuel for a targeted attack is composed of extreme overvalued beliefs that drive fixations. This is not a psychiatric diagnosis, and there is no known medical treatment for such beliefs which are shared by many, often within the subgroup of the individual of concern. The threat management of such beliefs involve their initial identification by the professional, an assessment of risk, and the development of a management plan to mitigate the risk of a targeted attack. Most individuals with extreme overvalued beliefs that manifest a fixation on a person or a cause will never be violent. However, a few will, and the work of threat assessment is to detect the violent signals that may be arising from the social and political noise which is evident in the public expressions of an extremist group. Such noise, moreover, is typically protected in democratic societies, as it is by the U.S. Constitution in its First Amendment, but there are a few exceptions, such as a true threat or incitement to violence (Amman & Meloy, 2021, 2022).

The most validated structured professional judgment instrument for detecting such violent signals is the heretofore mentioned TRAP-18 (Meloy, 2017). It has been found to statistically separate with medium to large effect sizes violent and nonviolent German jihadists (Bockler et al., 2020), Sovereign Citizens in the United States and Canada (Vargen & Challacombe, 2022), North American terrorists and other individuals of concern (Meloy, Goodwill, Meloy, Martinez, Amat & Morgan, 2019), and school shooters (Meloy, Hoffmann, Roshdi & Guldimann, 2014). Multiple studies have supported its postdictive validity (Allely &

Wicks, 2022). The TRAP-18 is composed of 10 distal characteristics and 8 proximal warning behaviors, and research has supported the theoretical underpinnings of the instrument by demonstrating that the proximal warning behaviors cluster together prior to an attack (Goodwill & Meloy, 2019), and they follow the distal characteristics before an attack in a time sequence analysis (Meloy, Goodwill, Clemmow & Gill, 2021).

The TRAP-18 is an assessment instrument that requires training and licensure (mhs.com); it is typically one of several risk instruments that are utilized by a Behavioral Threat Assessment Team depending on the nature of the case, and helps with both case formulation and case management as the team develops a plan to mitigate the danger they foresee (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; see chapter by Amman & Meloy this volume).

Psychiatric and Psychological Treatment

Similar to eating disorders—at first glance a very different issue than targeted attacks-- individuals with extreme overvalued beliefs do not generally walk in to a clinic or emergency room wanting help. Family and others that are close to the individual may be concerned, but often dismiss their ideology as “normal” because it is shared by others in their subculture (Rahman, 2018). For instance, an individual with anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, anti-government or anti-abortionist views may appear to have beliefs that are no different than others around them. In fact, such individuals, like patients with anorexia, do not have cardinal psychotic symptoms, making them difficult to detect and assess. Often the first sign of their “psychopathology” is late stage markers on the pathway to violence, or a mass attack which appears—but is not—spontaneous. The approach taken by most clinicians is to treat all co-occurring conditions which often improve cognitive distortions and “short-cut” thinking. For example, eating disorders often involve aggressive management of co-occurring anxiety,

depressive or obsessive disorders. A therapeutic milieu of peers has been shown to help eating disorders and radicalized individuals. Further studies are needed to study prevention efforts such as cognitive inoculation to build resistance against mass shooter and other extremist ideology (Braddock, 2020). Online algorithms may need regulation due to their binary operations (likes, emojis, hearts, etc.) which have been shown to lead the brain down a path to simplistic and absolute thinking (us vs. them) which increases polarization and radicalization (Rahman & Abugel, 2024). Finally, community education beginning in school aged children and extending to adults should be developed to emphasize critical thinking and media literacy.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the prominent cognitive-affective driver of pathological fixation called extreme overvalued beliefs. Data indicate that such simplistic, binary, and absolute beliefs, often shared by many in the person's extremist subgroup, will drive a few individuals to carry out acts of targeted violence, typically against a person or other group that is perceived to be an imminent, existential threat. The intermingling of culture with mental health has the potential to clash due to shifting political and normative fashions. However, concise definitions also allow courts to better assess cultural and social factors in the pursuit of justice, while providing the field of threat assessment and management with improved models. The term "mental disorder" is otherwise very broad and must be carefully scrutinized, and not assumed to be causative or correlative. The pathways to violence in such cases illustrate equifinality, and both lone actor pathways and group pathways have been elaborated upon as examples. Threat management and treatment of such cases are crucial, the former based upon the use of structured professional judgment instruments and multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment teams, the latter dependent upon a thorough workup of the individual to identify

any diagnosable conditions, their historical development, and their inherent cultural pathoplasticity. The ever-present challenge is for mental health professionals to enhance their clinical skills, know the current legal contexts within which they operate, and maintain their proper ethical moorings.

References

Allely, C. S., & Wicks, S. J. (2022). The feasibility and utility of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18): A review and recommendations. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 9(4), 218–259. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000179>

American Psychiatric Association (2022). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition. Text revision*. American Psychiatric Publishing.

American Psychological Association (2023). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Author.

Amman, M. & Meloy, J.R. (2021). Stochastic terrorism: a linguistic and psychological analysis. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, 1-13.

Amman, M. & Meloy, J.R. (2022). Incitement to violence and stochastic terrorism: Legal, academic, and practical parameters for researchers and investigators. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2022.2143352

Belew, K. (2018). *Bring the war home*. Harvard University Press.

Bergen, P. (2011). *The longest war*. Free Press.

Berger, J.M. (2018). *Extremism*. MIT Press.

Böckler, N., Allwinn, M., Metwaly, C., Wypych, B., Hoffmann, J., & Zick, A. (2020). Islamist terrorists in Germany and their warning behaviors: A comparative assessment of attackers and other convicts using the TRAP-18. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 7(3-4), 157–172. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000150>

Braddock, K. (2020). *Weaponized words*. Cambridge University Press.

Bugliosi, V. (2007). *Reclaiming history*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Calhoun, T. & Weston, S. (2003). *Contemporary threat management*. Specialized Training Services.

Calhoun, T. & Weston, S. (2016). *Threat assessment and management strategies 2nd ed*. CRC Press.

Corbin, J. (2002). *Al-Qaeda*. Thunder's Mouth Press.

Fein, R., Vossekuil, B. & Holden, G. (1995). *Threat assessment: an approach to prevent targeted violence*. (Publication NCJ 155000). Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

Fish FJ. (1964). An outline of psychiatry. *Brit. Medical Journal* 2(5412):820.

Gelder M, Gath D, Mayou R. (1989) *Oxford textbook of psychiatry*. Oxford University Press.

Gill, P. (2016). *Lone actor terrorists*. Routledge.

Gill, P., , Clemmow, C., , Hetzel, F., , Rottweiler, B., , Salman, N., , Van Der Vegt, I., , Marchment, Z., , Schumann, S., , Zolghadriha, S., Schulten, N., , Taylor, H. & Corner, E. (2020): Systematic review of mental health problems and violent extremism, *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, DOI:10.1080/14789949.2020.1820067

Goldstein, J. (2002). *Console and classify: The French psychiatric profession in the nineteenth century*. Univ Chicago Press.

Goodwill, A. & Meloy, J.R. (2019). Visualizing the relationship among indicators for lone actor terrorist attacks: multidimensional scaling and the TRAP-18. *Beh Sciences and the Law*.

Greenberg, J. & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Harvard University Press.

Hamid N et al. (2019) Neuroimaging 'will to fight' for sacred values: an empirical case study with supporters of an Al Qaeda associate. *Royal. Society. Open Science*. 6: 181585. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsos.181585>

Horton, D. & Wohl, R.R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry* 19:215-219.

Jung, C.G. (1947). The structure and dynamics of the psyche. *Collected Works, Volume 8*.

Jung, C.G. (1952/1956). Answer to Job. Psychology and religion: West and East. *Collected Works, Volume 11*.

Kernberg, O.F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. Aronson.

Low, P., Jeffries, J. & Bonnie, R. (1986). *The trial of John Hinckley, Jr.: A case study in the insanity defense*. The Foundation Press, Inc.

McHugh PR. (2006). *The mind has mountains: Reflections on society and psychiatry*. JHU Press.

Meloy JR (1989). Unrequited love and the wish to kill: Diagnosis and treatment of borderline erotomania. *Bull Menninger Clinic* 1989;53(6):477.

Meloy JR. (2006). Empirical basis and forensic application of affective and predatory violence. *Australian and NZ J Psychiatry*, 40:539-547.

Meloy, J.R. (2017). *Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18) Users' Manual 1.0*. Toronto: Multihealth Systems.

Meloy, J. R., Amman, M., Guldemann, A., & Hoffmann, J. (2023). The Concept of Last Resort in Threat Assessment. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000217>

Meloy, J. R., Goodwill, A., Clemmow, C., & Gill, P. (2021). Time Sequencing the TRAP-18 Indicators. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000157>

Meloy, J.R., Goodwill, A., Meloy, M.J., Amat, G., Martinez, M. & Morgan, M. (2019). Some TRAP-18 indicators discriminate between terrorist attackers and other subjects of national security concern. *J Threat Assess Management*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000119>

Meloy, J.R., Habermayer, E. & Guldemann, A. (2016). The warning behaviors of Anders Breivik. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. [doi.org/10.1037/tam0000037](http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000037)

Meloy, J.R. & Hoffmann, J., eds. (2014). *Int Handbook of Threat Assessment*. Oxford Univ. Press.

Meloy, JR & Hoffmann J., eds. (2021). *Int Handbook of Threat Assessment*. 2nd ed. Oxford Univ. Press.

Meloy, J.R., Hoffmann, J., Bibeau, L. & Guldemann, A. (2021). Warning behaviors. In JR Meloy, J Hoffmann, eds., *Int Handbook Threat Assessment, 2nd ed.* Oxford Univ. Press.

Meloy JR, Hoffmann J, Guldemann A, James D. (2012). The role of warning behaviors in threat assessment: An exploration and suggested typology. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 30(3):256-279.

Meloy, J.R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K. & Guldemann, A. (2014). Some warning behaviors discriminate between school shooters and other students of concern. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* doi.org/10.1037/tam0000020

Meloy, J.R. & Rahman, T. (2020). Cognitive-affective drivers of fixation in threat assessment. *Beh Sciences and the Law* doi:10.1002/bsl.2486

Mullen PE, James DV, Meloy JR, Pathé MT, Farnham FR, Preston L, et al. (2009). The fixated and the pursuit of public figures. *J Forensic Psychiatry Psychology* 2009;20(1):33-47.

Mullen, R. & Linscott, R. (2010). A comparison of delusions and overvalued ideas. *J Nerv Mental Disease* 198, 35-38.

Oyebode F. (2008). *Sims' symptoms in the mind: an introduction to descriptive psychopathology.* Elsevier Health Sciences.

Plato (2007). *The Republic*. Translated by Desmond Lee. 2nd ed. Penguin.

Pretus C. et al. (2019). Ventromedial and dorsolateral prefrontal interactions underlie will to fight and die for a cause. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 14, 569–577, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsz034>

Rahman, T. (2018). Extreme overvalued beliefs: how violent extremist beliefs become “normalized”. *Behavioral Sciences*, 8(1), 10.

Rahman, T. & Abugel, J. (2024). *Extreme overvalued beliefs*. Oxford University Press.

Rahman, T., Grellner, K. A., Harry, B., Beck, N., & Lauriello, J. (2013). Infanticide in a case of folie à deux. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 170(10), 1110-1112

Rahman, T., Hartz, S., Xiong, W., Meloy, J.R., Janofsky, J., Harry, B. & Resnick, P. (2020). Extreme overvalued belief. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.200001-20

Rahman, T., Meloy, J.R. & Bauer, R. (2019). Extreme overvalued belief and the legacy of Carl Wernicke. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*, DOI:10.29158/JAAPL.003847-19

Rahman, T., Resnick, P. J., & Harry, B. (2016). Anders Breivik: Extreme beliefs mistaken for psychosis. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. 44, 28–35

Rapoport, D. (2022). *Waves of global terrorism*. Columbia University Press.

Roy, T., Mihura, J., Friedman, A., Nichols, D. & Meloy, J.R. (2022). The last psychological evaluation of Charles Manson: Implications for personality, psychopathology, and ideology. *J Threat Assess Management* doi.org/10.1037/tam0000197

Schneider K. (1958). *Psychopathic Personalities*, trans by MW Hamilton. Cassell.

Siegel, A. & Victoroff, J. (2009). Understanding human aggression: new insights from neuroscience. *Int J Law Psychiatry* doi:10.1016/j.ijlp.2009.06.001

Summers, F. (1994). *Object relations theories and psychopathology*. The Analytic Press.

Vargen, L. & Challacombe, D. (2022) Violence risk assessment of Sovereign Citizens: An exploratory examination of the HCR-20 Version 3 and the TRAP-18. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2607

Venn, J. (2024). *Crime and psychology: Foundations of forensic practice*. Routledge.

Welner, M., Burgess, A., & O'Malley, K. Y. (2024). *Routledge Handbook of Homicide Studies*. Routledge.

Wernicke C. (1906). *Grundriss der Psychiatrie in klinischen Vorlesungen*. Thieme.