

Anders Breivik: cold and calculating, yes – but insane?

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Breivik probably has a psychopath's lack of affective empathy. But that alone cannot explain his terrible cruelty

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We can all remember where we were when we heard that Anders Breivik had gone to a summer camp on Utoya island in Norway, dressed as a police officer, and shot and killed 69 people, mainly teenagers. Psychologists call this a flashbulb memory: although it may not have exceptional detail, the memory has a vividness that derives from the emotional shock around it.

As bystanders to this tragedy, we heard one question repeatedly voiced as we sat glued to our TV screens: why? If we had asked Breivik why he murdered all those young people, he would have said it was to draw attention to his manifesto aimed at saving Europe from the Muslims. Indeed he emailed his deeply disturbing "2083: A European Declaration of Independence", to more than a thousand people 90 minutes before he bombed the government buildings in Oslo and just before he went out and shot all those people on the island camp.

For Breivik, the killings were part of his carefully planned political project. He claimed to have been working on the plan for nine years, calculating and implementing the financial and technical details – and 2083 is the year in his utopian vision when Europe was to finally be a Muslim-free zone. His manifesto is explicitly anti-multicultural.

If we could ask the court psychiatrists why Breivik murdered children, they would, according to this week's reports, say it is because he had paranoid schizophrenia. This diagnosis, if confirmed by independent clinicians, has surprised some people following the case because the 1,518 pages of Breivik's manifesto do not appear to be the incoherent output of "thought disorder", but instead read like a rather linear, carefully crafted tome. It is the work of a man with a single vision, a single belief that he wishes to prove to the world in exhaustive detail, and in a logical fashion.

That most people would find his reasoning deeply offensive, and his actions on 22 July monstrously horrendous, is a separate issue. The question remains whether a man who is so cold and calculating in executing his logical plan is sane or, as the court psychiatrists have suggested, insane. If this is confirmed, his thoughts and murderous actions are to be viewed as the products of a mental illness, requiring treatment in a hospital rather than punishment in a prison.

On 29 July, a week after the crime, I was asked by the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenbladet* for my reaction, as I had just published a book arguing that acts of human cruelty must by

definition entail a loss of "affective" empathy.

Empathy divides into at least two components: "cognitive" and "affective". Cognitive empathy is the drive to identify someone else's thoughts and feelings, being able to put yourself into their shoes to imagine what is in their mind. Affective empathy, in contrast, is the drive to respond to someone else's thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion. People with autism typically have difficulties with the cognitive component (they have trouble inferring what other people might think or feel), but have intact affective empathy (it upsets them to hear of others suffering). So Breivik is unlikely to have autism.

In contrast, those with antisocial personality disorder (including psychopaths) typically have the opposite profile: they have no trouble reading other people's thoughts and feelings (intact cognitive empathy) but other people's suffering is of no concern to them.

It is not for me to speculate on Breivik's diagnosis, and in some ways the precise formulation is of secondary importance. The more important issue is to understand what factors can lead to empathy erosion.

Decades of research underscore the importance both of early childhood emotional experience and of genetic factors that have far-reaching effects on an adult's empathy levels. Advances in neuroscience now enable us to delineate the "empathy circuit" (a network of brain regions) with much more precision. Low affective empathy is necessary to explain Breivik's behaviour. But low affective empathy is not sufficient to explain such cruelty, because there are people with low affective empathy who do not go on to commit such acts.

Low affective empathy is the precondition for cruelty, interacting with other factors. In Breivik's case, his deeply held (and frightening) ideological convictions may have been one extra ingredient in the deadly mix.

In the 29 July issue of *Morgenbladet*, I wrote that the 32-year-old Breivik appeared to have many parallels with the young Hitler. At 8.30pm on 8 November 1923, Hitler (then aged 34) burst into the largest beer hall in Munich, fired a shot into the ceiling and jumped on a chair, yelling: "The national revolution has broken out!" Breivik also thought he was starting a revolution. When arrested, Hitler wanted to use the trial to make political speeches, just as Breivik hoped to do.

Sent to prison for five years, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, a long ideological justification for his racist actions that also has many parallels with Breivik's manifesto. Hitler's diatribe against the "Jewification" of Europe parallels Breivik's diatribe against the "Islamification" of Europe. Both were men convinced by the rightness of their beliefs; both were willing to sacrifice people to achieve their ends.

Our hearts go out to the families and friends of Breivik's victims, whose grief must be as unimaginably painful today as it was on 22 July.

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