



# Understanding cru



It's easy to dismiss the murderous acts of Anders Breivik or Mohammed Merah as those of a monster. But if we are to prevent them happening again, we have to recognise that a lack of empathy is the root cause, says **Simon Baron-Cohen** (pictured left)

**How do we make sense of extreme acts of violence? When we hear about them on television or read about them in the newspapers, one response is to simply accept that cruelty is part of our world, an uncomfortable fact that we have to get used to. Another response however is to try to understand how cruelty is possible, so that we can begin to analyse how to reduce its likelihood.**

Consider two shocking events from the last 12 months. On 22 July 2011, 33-year-old Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 people, most of them teenagers, on the island of Utøya in Norway. On 19 March 2012, 23-year-old Mohammed Merah shot and killed a rabbi and three young children at a Jewish school in Toulouse, France.

Both killers targeted children. Breivik was dressed as a policeman

so that the children would approach him, only to be shot. Merah shot 30-year-old Rabbi Jonathan Sandler while he was trying to shield his children, four-year-old Gabriel and five-year-old Ariele, both of whom were also killed. As the father and one son lay dying, the other son crawled away but was shot trying to escape. Once inside the school, Merah grabbed seven-year-old Myriam Monsonego and shot her in the head point blank. Merah had been behind the killings of three French Muslim soldiers days earlier, just as Breivik had earlier been behind the bombing and killing of innocent civilians. Both murderers were eventually stopped. Breivik was arrested and has been on trial this year. Merah, after a 30-hour siege of his barricaded apartment, was killed.

The crimes left people in France and Norway in a state of fear and



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unimaginable grief. For most people there was one fundamental question: how could anyone commit such acts? French president Nicolas Sarkozy and foreign minister Alain Juppé used the word “monster” to describe Merah, and this word has also been used to describe Breivik. It implies that Breivik and Merah are alien, or not human. This unhelpful explanation is out of place in an age of science and rationalism. We need a proper explanation.

Breivik and Merah presumably stopped seeing their victims as people with thoughts, feelings, rights – people with families and friends who loved them and with dreams and hopes for a future. They instead presumably saw them as objects that could be discarded. How? We must assume that Merah and Breivik had lost all empathy for their victims. Looking at these two awful cases, we

can see some common factors that give us a clue as to how a person can lose their empathy.

First, both young men had extreme ideological beliefs. Breivik says the reason he murdered children and adolescents was to draw attention to his manifesto aimed at preventing Europe from being multicultural and from “Islamification”. Merah said he wanted to avenge the deaths of Palestinians, and take revenge on French Muslim soldiers fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. So both men were convinced by the rightness of their political beliefs, and both were willing to sacrifice and dehumanise people to achieve their ends.

Second, Breivik’s parents divorced when he was a year old, and he had had no contact with his father since 1995. Merah too was raised by his mother after his parents divorced when he was young. Certainly psychological research from John Bowlby tells us that one route to low empathy is an absence of important parental affection in early childhood, and growing up with a sense of distrust and feeling uncared for. However, nurture is not sufficient to explain how a child grows up to be so antisocial: nature also plays a role. Research by Avshalom Caspi shows there are genes that correlate with how much empathy a person has, and that nature and nurture interact.

Third, these two murderers both (now) have a psychiatric diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder. MRI scanning shows that a fully functioning “empathy circuit” involves at least 10 different brain regions. Some of these are in the cortex, while others are deep in the limbic system of the brain. Most of us have an empathy circuit that develops and functions naturally, but some people have an empathy circuit that malfunctions. In individuals with narcissistic or psychopathic personality disorder, parts of the empathy circuit are less well developed or less active.

So, at least three factors can cause the empathy circuit to malfunction, including our social experience, a tendency towards extremist beliefs and our biology. These can in

**In an Oslo courtroom, Anders Behring Breivik hears the charges of terrorism and pre-meditated murder against him.** Photo: AP Photo/Stian Lysberg Solum

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combination tip a person to act in cruel ways. How this neural circuit functions determines whether we act with cruelty or kindness.

Empathy is normative: most of us have enough empathy to know which of our words or deeds would upset others, so we can bite our lip or sit on our hands when we sense it is prudent or kind to do so. Empathy provides the brakes on our behaviour, since without it our own selfish thoughts and wishes would burst through, unbridled, potentially bruising other people’s feelings, or with even worse outcomes. We all know what empathy is: seeing an old man stumble across the street, we not only read the situation but feel impelled to rush over and help him. Lacking empathy would mean we could just walk by.

Given the biological dimension to these problems raises the uncomfortable question of whether those who suffer from long-term empathy malfunctions can be considered to have a neurological disability. The view that some murderers may have an “empathy disorder” could make the line between the prison system and the health system increasingly hard to draw. Clearly, we need to impose sanctions on those who hurt others or commit murder, and we need to protect our communities from their dangerousness, including needing to confine those who are a threat. But if their act of cruelty is the result of their brain function, the question of whether they should be detained in a prison or a hospital becomes blurred.

Nothing can undo the awful, terrible loss of the family of the victims, to whom we send our deepest sympathy. But if we are to prevent tragedies such as those in Utøya and Toulouse, we must learn how to diagnose the absence of empathy — and intervene before the potential for cruelty becomes actual cruelty. ■

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