

Nexus

When Killers Target Kids

The Science of Empathy Grapples with the Unthinkable



by **Simon Baron-Cohen**

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

Both killers targeted children, which makes the crimes especially shocking. Breivik arrived at a summer camp on Utøya dressed as a policeman so that the children would approach him before he opened fire. Merah shot 30-year-old Rabbi Jonathan Sandler while Sandler was trying to shield his children, 4-year-old Gabriel and 5-year-old Ariele. As the father and one son lay dying, the other son crawled away but was shot trying to escape. Inside the school, Merah grabbed 7-year-old Myriam Monsonego, the daughter of the head teacher, and shot her in the head point-blank. Days earlier, Merah had killed three French Muslim soldiers, just as Breivik had bombed and killed innocent civilians hours before the Utøya massacre. Breivik was arrested and is currently on trial. Merah, after a 30-hour siege of his barricaded apartment, was killed by French police.

The crimes left people in France and Norway in a state of extreme fear and unimaginable grief. For most people there was one fundamental question: how could anyone commit such acts? French President Nicolas Sarkozy and French 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. But this label is unhelpful and out of place in an age of science and rationalism. We need a proper explanation, and it centers on psychological and neuroscientific research into empathy.

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. 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 behavior.

Those brakes were nonexistent in Breivik and Merah. The two killers were able to stop 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 came to see them as objects that could be discarded. How?

Looking at these two awful cases, we can see some common factors that give us a clue as to what happened. First, both young men had extreme ideological beliefs. We don't yet know if extremist ideology is a risk factor for cruelty, but it seems plausible that ideology can lead people to “switch off” their empathy. Breivik says the reason he murdered children and adolescents was to draw attention to his manifesto aimed at preventing Europe from being multi-cultural 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. Both men were convinced by the rightness of their political beliefs, and both were willing to sacrifice and dehumanize people to achieve their ends.

Second, these two murderers shared something else: Breivik's parents divorced when he was a year old, and Breivik had had no contact with his father since 1995. Merah, too, was raised by his mother after his parents divorced when he was young. Psychological research from psychiatrist John Bowlby tells us that one route to low empathy is an absence of important parental affection in early childhood. So is growing up with a sense of distrust and feeling uncared for.

Third, research by personality psychologist Avshalom Caspi shows that certain genes, if present in a person who has experienced emotional neglect, can determine how much empathy a person ends up with. In other words, childhood neglect is one risk factor, but in combination with the “wrong” genes, the risk increases still further. Identifying if murderers like Breivik and Merah share these genes will be important for future research to establish.

Finally, both Breivik and Merah have been given 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

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are less well-developed or less active.

So at least four factors can cause the empathy circuit to malfunction: extremist beliefs, adverse social experience, genetic make-up, and personality disorder. These can in combination tip a person to act in cruel ways. How this neural circuit functions determines whether we act with cruelty or kindness.

Given the biological dimension to many of these factors, however, we face the uncomfortable question of whether those who suffer from low levels of empathy long-term can be considered to have a neurological disability. Clearly, we need to impose sanctions on those who hurt others or commit murder, and we need to protect our communities from their dangerousness. But 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. We are also left to wonder whether it is possible to intervene in order to remedy severe malfunctions of the empathy circuit. This requires more research. We know that some aspects of empathy (such as emotion recognition skills) can be taught, and some therapies aimed at fostering empathy (such as mentalization based therapy) are being explored for people with personality disorders. But these are fledgling efforts. Whether any interventions would be effective in preventing murder is completely unknown.

Nothing can undo the awful, terrible loss of the families 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 it becomes fatal.

Simon Baron-Cohen is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge and author of *The Science of Evil* (Basic Books), published in the U.K. as *Zero Degrees of Empathy* (Penguin).

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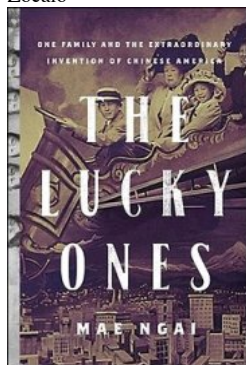
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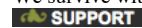
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