Drop the idea of the lone wolf as a madman: most terrorists think rationally

The shocking truth is that violent extremists have a level of normality like you or me

GEOFF DEAN

THE atrocities perpetrated by violent extremists in recent times provoke in most people a visceral reaction of outrage and utter disbelief that there are those in our midst willing to commit murder or acts of unspeakable savagery on innocent people in the name of their religion or some political ideology.

Our first impressions are often to think these people must be mentally sick, crazy, mad, bad and evil to carry out such calculated acts of horror.

No matter how convenient and comfortable these impressions are in helping us come to grips with the brutality, they are, like most first impressions, missing the real significance of what is going on.

Media reporting shapes public perceptions. Hence, how print, digital and social media feed off each other to report such carnage is critical to having rationally informed citizens who can evaluate and reflect on their own initial reactions to these human tragedies.

Unfortunately, there are commentators in the media, just as in politics and academia, who are ill-informed or ill-advised on some aspects of violent extremism.

Worse still are those who stray beyond their domain of expertise to make comments that muddy, rather than clarify, the complexities.

There is a popular misrepresentation, particularly regarding lone-wolf violent extremists, that these actors are mad or mentally ill. After the Sydney siege at the Lindt cafe on December 15 a sampling of newspapers reported that the perpetrator, Man Haron Monis, was suffering from mental instability, was a crazed gunman, and had an abnormal mental state.

The problem with this popular notion is that it misses the larger picture and its complexity. The fact is, the bulk of the literature on violent extremists makes it very clear they are not in the main crazy, mentally ill or psychiatrically disturbed individuals. Nor, for that matter, is there a single identifiable profile or personality type into which they fall.

The vast majority of violent extremists (this includes terrorists, militants and active shooters) are characteristically ordinary, "normal" people whose thinking operates at the extreme end of normality, in terms of a rigid intolerance for anyone who does not agree with their perspective or view of the world.

To put it another way, a small minority of violent extremists may manifest some degree of mental illness, loosely defined, in their behaviour prior to or during an attack.

For instance, some paranoia, a delusional state, irrational aggression or an obsessional fixation of intolerance and hatred towards society, like Monis, the self-proclaimed sheik. What Monis and many other lone-wolf violent extremists do also exhibit is a level of rat-cunning and tactical organisation in planning and carrying out an attack, which is hardly consistent with having significant mental instability.

While some acts by violent extremists may show signs of mental illness mixed in with the barbarity of their behaviour, the shocking truth is that the vast majority have a level of normality just like you or me. The point is, mental illness complicates rather than causes violent extremism.

The difference is that, unlike us, violent extremists have conditioned their minds through various neurocognitive processes, either by themselves (self-radicalisation) or with the help of others (group radicalisation), with a set of extreme perceptions and violent beliefs.

When they reach the point where they have set their mind on a rigidly fixated conviction that their extreme perceptions and violent beliefs are true and logical, and inescapably lead to the conclusion that inflicting violence and terror on society is both justified and necessary, all that remains is to pick the target and timing for the killing to begin.

Whatever else may be going on in the mind of a violent extremist, mental illness should be far less of a consideration for media commentators, politicians and sound-bite-grabbing academics.

Crazy or mentally ill lone wolves, be they Islamic terrorists, loose affiliates of militant hate groups, or killers targeting schools, workplaces and public places to commit random acts of lethal violence, are a very small dot on the canvas of violent extremism.

Even Hamas, the terrorist-listed organisation in Palestine, uses forensic psychologists to test its recruits for suicide-bombing missions in Israel, to weed out the mentally unstable.

Hamas recognised a long time ago that enlisting mentally ill individuals as suicide bombers was counterproductive. Such individuals tend to panic at checkpoints and get caught or blow themselves up too early, inflicting only minor damage.

An article in this newspaper two weeks ago suggested that

"given the links between mental health and the propensity to lone-wolf violence, we need a closer examination of how to handle people already in mental health treatment who may not be on the radar of the security services".

It is all well and good to have a closer examination of people in mental health treatment, but despite its good intentions the problem with this approach is threefold.

First, the so-called "given" links between mental health and violent extremism are tenuous at best.

Second, it misdirects the focus and further stigmatises mentally ill individuals as potential violent extremists, and diverts finite security service resources into following up on "crazies" and those regarded as "loony tunes".

Third, it misses the larger threat from those "normal" people who just happen to have simmering in their heads rock-hard, fixated perceptions and beliefs of extreme violence.

The focal question the media, politicians, and academia should be asking is: "What risk/threat assessment tools are police and security agencies using to detect violently extreme thinking in normal individuals who are already on the security radar before the killing starts?"

The truly terrifying fact is that violent extremists think rationally; what is irrational is their obsessional addiction to perceptions and beliefs that justify in their own minds the carrying out of horrific acts of violence on the general public.

Geoff Dean is director of international programs at Griffith University.

AP

Violent extremists conclude that inflicting terror on society is justified and necessary