"A Terror to Their Neighbors": Beliefs About Mental Disorder and Violence in Historical and Cultural Perspective

John Monahan

This tribute to the enduring legacy of Bernard Diamond explores public perceptions of a link between mental disorder and violent behavior. Research on contemporary American beliefs is summarized and compared both to historical accounts of public perceptions in Western cultures and to anthropological investigations of public perceptions in non-Western cultures. The conclusion of these reviews is that the belief that mental disorder bears some moderate association with violent behavior is both historically invariant and culturally universal.

Of the many contributions that Dr. Bernard Diamond made to the field of mental health law, none had more impact than his 1974 article in the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* titled "The Psychiatric Prediction of Dangerousness."[1]

The most quoted part of this piece is the penultimate paragraph:

> Neither psychiatrists nor other behavioral scientists are able to predict the occurrence of violent behavior with sufficient reliability to justify the restriction of freedom of persons on the basis of the label of potential dangerousness. Accordingly, it is recommended that courts no longer ask such experts to give their opinion of the potential dangerousness of any person, and that psychiatrists and other behav-

ioral scientists acknowledge their inability to make such predictions when called upon to do so by courts and other agencies (p. 452).

This article, and usually this paragraph, was cited by the United States Supreme Court (three times),[2] by lower federal courts (four times),[3] by the State Supreme Courts of Alaska,[4] California (four times),[5] Colorado,[6] Connecticut (twice),[7] Hawaii (twice),[8] Illinois,[9] Iowa (twice),[10] Minnesota,[11] New Hampshire (five times),[12] New Jersey,[13] Ohio,[14] and Washington,[15] and by lower state courts too many times to cite. While the piece was published 17 years ago, it is still being cited by courts in 1991.[16]

In this brief tribute to Dr. Diamond's pervasive and enduring influence on the field of mental health law, I would like to touch upon the theme of his classic article. I will not attempt to update the

Dr. Monahan is Doherty Professor of Law and Professor of Psychology and Legal Medicine at the University of Virginia. Requests for reprints should be addressed to John Monahan, School of Law, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22901.

research base upon which his quotation rests. That has been done elsewhere.[17] Rather, I will explore a related aspect of the connection between mental disorder and violence, namely, how the public has perceived these two phenomena to be associated and how these perceptions have remained relatively constant over time and across cultures. I will first look at current Western perceptions, then review the historical evidence within Western cultures, and finally address the cross-cultural literature.

Current Perceptions

One poll conducted by the Field Institute[18] for the California Department of Mental Health asked 1,500 representative California adults whether they agreed with the statement, "A person who is diagnosed as schizophrenic is more likely to commit a violent crime than a normal person." Almost two-thirds of the sample (61%) said that they definitely or probably agreed. However, the public does not believe that mental disorder inevitably or even frequently leads to violence. In another survey of 1,000 adults from all parts of the United States conducted by the DYG Corporation[19] for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Program on Chronic Mental Illness, 24 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "People with chronic mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population," while twice as many (48%) agreed with the proposition, "The mentally ill are far *less* of a danger than most people believe."

Modern opinions no doubt reflect the impact of the image of the mentally disordered promoted by the media.[20] One content analysis performed for the National Institute of Mental Health[21] found that 17 percent of all prime-time American television programs classified as dramas depicted a character as mentally ill. Seventy-three percent of these mentally ill characters were portrayed as violent, compared with 40 percent of the "normal" characters, and 23 percent of the mentally ill characters were shown to be homicidal, compared with 10 percent of the "normal" characters. Nor are such images limited to television. A content analysis of stories from the United Press International database[22] found that in 86 percent of all print stories dealing with former mental patients, a violent crime—"usually murder or mass murder" (p. 64)—was the focus of the article.

Historical Perceptions

Such beliefs about the relationship between mental disorder and violence are not new and not limited to the United States. Since the origins of recorded history, the general public has believed that there was a connection of some sort between mental disorder and violence. References in Greek and Roman literature to the violence potential of the mentally ill date from the fifth century B.C. As Rosen[23] noted, in the ancient world "two forms of behaviour were considered particularly characteristic of the mentally disordered, their habit of wandering about, and their proneness to violence" (p. 98). Plato, in *Alcibiades II*, records a dialogue between Socrates and

Alcibiades. Alcibiades claimed that many citizens of Athens were "mad." Socrates refuted this claim by arguing that the rate of mental disorder could not be very high, since the prevalence of violence was very low. "How could we live in safety with so many crazy people? Should we not long ago have paid the penalty at their hands, and have been struck and beaten and endured every other form of ill usage which madmen are wont to inflict?" (p. 794). Plautus, in a play written about 270 B.C. titled *Casina*, wrote of a maid who had taken up a sword and was threatening to murder a lover. One character describes the situation: "She's chasing everyone through the house there, and won't let a soul come near her; they're hiding under chests and couches afraid to breath a word." To this, her lover asks, "What the deuce has gotten into her all of a sudden this way?" The answer he received seemed to suffice for an explanation: "She's gone crazy" (p. 73). Likewise, Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, declared that "in some cases" madness was the cause of bizarre murders (p. 171), and the comments of Plutarch, in *Pompey*, indicate "the wide acceptance of the view that those who were mentally deranged were likely to throw stones or exhibit other kinds of aggressive behavior when agitated" (p. 101). Advice to those responsible for the care of the mentally disordered often made reference to their dangerousness and the necessity for restraints (p. 100).

Even in ancient times, the public perception was not that all of the mentally ill were violent, just a more-than-average

proportion. The Roman philosopher Philo Judaeus, for example, divided the mentally disordered into two groups. One of these was "of the easy-going gentle style," and the other consisted of those "whose madness was...of the fierce and savage kind, which is dangerous both to the madmen themselves and those who approach them" (pp. 280-1).

Much more recently, the London *Times* published the following ditty on its editorial page in 1843 on the day after Daniel McNaughten's acquittal of murdering the secretary of the Prime Minister established the test of legal insanity that still exists in many Anglo-American jurisdictions:

Ye people of England exult and be glad

For ye're now at the mercy of the merciless mad

In the United States, the perception of a link between mental disorder and violence was common in colonial times. The first general hospital in the New World to include a ward for the mentally disordered—the cellar—was founded at the urging of no less than Benjamin Franklin. After arguing in vain that the Pennsylvania colony was morally obligated to provide for the disordered, he switched tacks and petitioned the Assembly in 1751 that "the Number of Persons distempered in Mind and deprived of their rational Faculties has increased greatly in this province. Some of them going at large are a Terror to their Neighbors, who are daily apprehensive of the Violences they may commit."[24] This argument hit a responsive chord, and the hospital still stands.

The first American mental hospital

devoted exclusively to the care of the mentally disordered was erected after the Governor of the Virginia Colony in 1766 addressed Patrick Henry and other members of the House of Burgess in terms that barely bothered to paraphrase those of Benjamin Franklin 15 years earlier: "[I] recommend to your Consideration and Humanity a poor unhappy set of People who are deprived of their Senses, and wander about the Country, terrifying the Rest of their Fellow Creatures."[25] That hospital, too, is still there.

Perceptions in Non-Western Cultures

The belief that mental disorder is conducive to violence is not unique to Western cultures. Westermeyer and Kroll[26] studied all persons known as *baa* or "crazy" in 27 villages in Laos, a country that at the time of the research was without a single psychiatrist, psychologist, or mental hospital. They questioned family members, neighbors, and the people seen as *baa* themselves about the occurrence of violence and its relationship to violence. They were told that 11 percent of their subjects exhibited violent behavior shortly prior to acquiring the *baa* label, and 54 percent were reported as violent after having become *baa*. Also in the mid-1970s, Jones and Horne[27] studied almost 1,000 people in four isolated Aboriginal missions in the Australian desert. "Frequently," they concluded, "an aggressive act by the patient causes him to present clinically, but with an explanation that was culturally appropriate—he would claim, for example, that his symptoms have been inflicted upon him by magical means and his aggression was his way of protecting himself" (p. 225).

Finally, Jane Murphy, a noted anthropologist, reviewed[28] research on responses to mental disorder in several Northwestern Native American and Central African ethnic groups. She reported great similarities among people in very different traditional societies:

> There seems to be little that is distinctively cultural in the attitudes and actions directed toward the mentally ill, except in such matters as that an abandoned anthill could not be used as an asylum in the arctic or a barred igloo in the tropics. . . . If the behavior indicates helplessness, help tends to be given, especially in food and clothes. If the behavior appears foolish or incongruous. . ., laughter is the response. If the behavior is noisy and agitated, the response may be to quiet, sometimes by herbs and sometimes by other means. If the behavior is violent or threatening, the response is to restrain or subdue (p. 1025).

Of course, the anthropological fact that a popular belief has persisted since antiquity and is found in all societies does not mean that the belief is valid. Unfounded prejudices may also be persistent and widespread. But if the conviction that mental disorder *sometimes* predisposes toward violent behavior is a myth, it is nonetheless worth noting that it is a myth that is both culturally universal and historically invariant.

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