

Orlando Terrorism: How Can Analysts Grapple with Terrorism - Directed at LGBTQ Individuals?

Dr. Ethan M. Grumbach

Co-Authors: Dr. Susan McNamara

In 2014, the total number of deaths worldwide from terrorism increased by eighty percent when compared to the prior year, the largest yearly increase in fifteen years. After a slight dip in 2015, terrorist attacks are again on the rise in 2016. Large-scale attacks coordinated by international terrorist groups (such as the 9/11 attacks and the recent deadly assaults on Paris, northern Iraq, Istanbul, and Syria) garner a disproportionate amount of media attention. But so-called lone wolves — individuals or small groups working without the aid of a larger organization — are responsible for seventy percent of terrorism deaths in the West. On June 12, 2016, a 29-year-old man killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in a [terrorist attack/hate crime](#) inside [Pulse](#), a [gay nightclub](#) in [Orlando, Florida](#), United States. Pulse was hosting Latin Night and most of the victims were [Latino](#). It was the deadliest [mass shooting](#) by a single shooter in United States history, the deadliest incident of [violence against LGBT people](#) in United States history, and the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11/2001.

We are repeatedly faced with news of violence, which we must contend with in both our personal and professional lives. These moments are compounded by the zeitgeist, as we live in a time when “Ignorance has become a form of weaponized refusal to acknowledge the violence of the past, and revels in a culture of media spectacles in which public concerns are translated into private obsessions, consumerism and fatuous entertainment” (Evans & Giroux, 2016). When violence is directed toward LGBTQ individuals it is all too easy to forget the context of past struggles, hardship and violence these individuals have experienced and continue to experience. The United States National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reported that 2015 had the highest levels of violence against the LGBT community since 2011, the most frequent victims being trans women of color, the most ever recorded. The [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights documented 770 killings](#) and serious violent attacks against LGBT persons between January 1, 2013, and March 31, 2014, including [594 hate-related killings of LGBT people in Brazil](#).

What can we provide as psychoanalysts to help people understand this targeted violence of LGBTQ people? We believe that the analytic instrument in each of us is useful and important in helping individuals, families and communities grappling with these unspeakable moments of savagery.

Imagine opening your consulting room door and having your patient rush in. He begins speaking before he sits down, sharing his despair about the terrorist act that occurred the day before. He says that he was on the phone with his friend who was there during the attack, who had called him while she was trying to hide in a closet to avoid being shot. He details the agony he felt being unable to do anything to help her, hearing the bullets in the background, hearing the sounds of wounded people moaning and the panic in his friend as she thought she was about to die. His friend survived the ordeal without physical injury, but was now shaken and extremely traumatized. The patient was unable provide immediate help due to the distance, but he was sorting out how quickly he or other

friends could get there to offer support and assistance. As the analyst receives these communications from the patient it is a challenge to keep one's mind.

As Bion stated in his paper "Attacks on Linking" (1959) with the destruction of a link two objects cannot be brought together in a productive way. The links become fragmented and projected in an expulsion that is often overwhelming for the analyst to receive. When traumatized patients bring such raw material into the session the analyst struggles to stay present, not resort to preconceived notions and remain available and open to receive and explore the meaning of these events to the particular individual. It can be extremely tempting to rush to quick reasoning or explaining, avoid the capacity to explore and wonder together, maintaining what Bion describes as the creative relationship, as the analyst uses verbal communication and their psychoanalytic experience to establish a link with the patient.

It is easy to overlook the importance of gay nightclubs like Pulse, which provide a sense of community and belonging for LGBTQ people. For many, Pulse was a uniquely safe place to explore their sexuality and gender, in dim lighting without fear of being outed. The people who died at Pulse were very young; the average age was 29 and the youngest victim was 18 years old. Experts have commented that gay nightclubs are different than, for example, a Gay-Straight Alliance group on a college campus. Those meetings are in broad daylight, often in places where people fear recognition and discrimination. Pulse wasn't just a place to dance and party, it was a place where people could find a community when they were ostracized or targeted in other settings. We often take this need for safe places for granted and don't value how much it means to LGBTQ individuals to have a protected and welcoming space.

Many people who witnessed the Orlando shootings themselves, or had family or friends who were involved, struggle with how to manage their feelings. This was perhaps especially difficult for those who found out only in death that their family member, colleague, or friend was gay, reminiscent of the AIDS era. Raw video footage from inside Pulse during the attack was available online very shortly afterwards. How do we look? How do we listen? In the case of Orlando shootings, we need to examine terrorism as it specifically relates to LGBTQ people, bearing in mind that according to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, hate-motivated violence against LGBT people is widespread, brutal, and often perpetrated with impunity. LGBT and intersex people are also victims of torture and ill treatment, including in custody and in clinics and hospitals. In 76 countries it's illegal to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. And in at least five countries, it can be punished by death. There has been progress, but there has also been backlash to that progress.

"Homophobia" is inadequate to describe this phenomenon; it says nothing about the system that breeds anti-gay violence. According to Kilhefner (2016), using the word homophobia "says nothing about the dominant intellectual, religious, and cultural superstructure that supports an ideology of heterosexual superiority." He proposes that "homophobia" be replaced by "hetero supremacy," as heterosexual people create a category of inferior people to brutalize. Both acts of individual butchery and state-sponsored terror against LGBTQ people are driven by this ideology of heterosexual supremacy. The deeply seated political, educational, and social conditions that foster heterosexual supremacy allow a climate of hate, racism, and bigotry to become the dominant discourse of society. Even within our psychoanalytic world there are hetero supremacy ideological comments, ideas, and actions that go largely unrecognized and unacknowledged, negatively impacting the evolution of our understanding of gender and sexuality; this ideology is fundamentally disrespectful and extremely hurtful to LGBTQ patients, candidates, and analysts.

Psychoanalysis is the discipline “most practiced in the art of uncertainty” (Goldner 1991), fostering skepticism about the knower and the known, elaborating multiply-layered meanings as opposed to a final truth. Yet Freud’s radically disruptive method and beliefs were embedded in misogynistic and normative presumptions. His thesis included the following interrelated elements: “the derogation of femininity, the normative dominance of heterosexuality, and the dichotomous division of gender” (Goldner 1991). Goldner firmly challenges all these elements, especially the assumption that an internally consistent gender identity is possible or even desirable, arguing that “gender coherence, consistency, conformity, and identity are culturally mandated normative ideals that psychoanalysis has absorbed uncritically” resulting in psychological paradoxes characteristic of a double bind. Within conventional psychoanalytic discourse, the questioning of gender as a binary system and the questioning of compulsive heterosexuality continue to be fundamentally ignored and overlooked.

“Thus, those gender and sexual identities that fail to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities,” and people only become intelligible through “becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler 1990).

Critically, when gender is a psychic and cultural designation of oneself that rids itself of opposing tendencies, gender then becomes a universal false-self system compliant with the rule of the gender binary and consequent normative heterosexuality. Gender then functions “magically” as an ideological and psychic frame to split off mental states – a defensive use of gender as a difference marker. “By exploiting and amplifying gender distinctions, we can organize, simplify, and rationalize relational conflicts and dilemmas in terms of gender categories and hierarchies” (Goldner 1991), with fundamental expectations of behavior, including sexuality, shaped by cultural fantasies about masculinity and femininity. Then, “the contradictions inherent in the conflicting logic of these gender constructions generate paradoxes at all levels of psychic and familial organization” (Goldner 1991), creating an injunctive context that is double-binding:

The child must accommodate to these impossible terms by performing acts of internal “violence” on the self. In so doing, the relational complexity of the internal world fragments, and ambivalence devolves into splitting and false self operations (Goldner 1991).

Ultimately, compulsory heterosexuality and the exploitation of gender distinctions in the struggle for political and social power produces “untenable relationship binds and unbridgeable psychic splits,” damaging the human spirit in all of us and leading to heterosexual supremacy and the rationalization of violence towards and the murder of LGBTQ people.

As analysts, we have the opportunity to bring our deep understanding of the dynamics of trauma, terror, shame, and humiliation to our work. While it may seem ordinary and a common part of our day-to-day investment in our analytic work, it is often easy to overlook the profound implications of how it feels to be listened to by another. LGBTQ individuals who have repeatedly been scapegoated, teased, taunted, shamed and humiliated throughout their lifespan can have intense reactions and be re-traumatized in the context of violence such as the Orlando shootings. The imperative to seek out explanations, blame and vilify creates further trauma for survivors, their families, and the LGBTQ community. Some religious leaders condoned the behavior of the killer, mocking the dead and the survivors. There was support on social media for the shootings. Some political leaders in the United States decried the attack, yet did not mention that it was a gay nightclub that was targeted.

Psychoanalysis is only now recognizing the impact of decades of preventing LGBTQ individuals from becoming analysts, joining the analytic community, or participating in professional meetings as

welcomed colleagues. IPA President Stefano Bolognini addressed this history of prejudice in a recent podcast interview. President Bolognini announced two new IPA initiatives: first, the formation of a new committee, the IPA Sexual and Gender Diversity Studies Committee to promote and organize research and study of gender and sexuality with an open mind and without prejudice, and second, the Elizabeth Young-Bruehl Prejudice Award, with the purpose of increasing awareness of the need to develop understanding of prejudice of various kinds within psychoanalysis and to honor the work of Dr. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl.

As organizations like the IPA enter into the dialog about prejudice against and violence towards LGBTQ people, LGBTQ analysts can offer our experience of grappling with trauma and terrorism as it has affected LGBTQ people over and over, around the world. Psychoanalysts can provide understanding and recognition of these disturbing experiences by stepping back from the psychoanalytic anxious “history and habit of regulating gender” (Corbett 2011), and instead recognizing and assisting patients as they turn to us for help via our ability to listen to and witness inescapable injustice.

REFERENCES

Bion, W. (1959). “Attacks on Linking.” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Volume 40, p. 308-315.

Kleinman, K. (June 2016). Stefano Bolognini Interview.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcSEyM4VWbo&list=PLhxiwE76e0QYSh-YWx3oSfUY5ES-5ICT7I>

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge: New York & London.

Evans, B. & Giroux, H.A. June 20, 2016. “The Violence of Forgetting.” *The New York Times*.

<http://nyti.ms/201EPed>

Corbett, K. (2011). “Gender Regulation.” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. Vol. LXXX, p. 441-459.

Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism. Institute for Economics and Peace.

Gamio, L. & Meko, T. July 16, 2016. “How terrorism in the West compares to terrorism everywhere else.” *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/the-scale-of-terrorist-attacks-around-the-world/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/the-scale-of-terrorist-attacks-around-the-world/>

Golder, V. (1991). “Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender.” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*. 1:249-272.

Kilhefner, D. 2016. “It’s Time to Retire the Word ‘Homophobia.’” *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*. Sept-Oct 2016.

<http://www.glreview.org/article/its-time-to-retire-the-word-homophobia/>

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights/Organization of American States. “Violence against LGBTI Persons in the Americas.” 12 November 2015.

<http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/ViolenceLGBTIPersons.pdf>

United Nations Human Rights Council Report: Discrimination and Violence against Individuals Based on their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Discrimination/LGBT/A_HRC_29_23_One_pager_en.pdf

Waters, E., Jindasurat, C., & Wolfe, C. (2016). “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2015.” National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs. New York, NY