

Anders Breivik
Terrorism, Strain Theory and Social Work

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Abstract

This analysis considers the importance of general strain theory (GST) in understanding contemporary far-right movements and violence involving white heterosexual men. General strain theory describes how objective and subjective strains can contribute to antisocial behaviours including terrorism. The mass murder committed by Anders Breivik in July 2011 in Norway will be considered as an application of this theory to terrorism. The analysis remains relevant, as evidenced by the most recent 2019 New Zealand mosque terrorism incidents. It begins with an overview of Breivik's turbulent childhood and adulthood, marked by isolation and failed business ventures. Next, an outline of the July 2011 Norway attacks provides further context. After providing a detailed exploration of these attacks, this analysis will consider general strain theory in relation to the situation outlined above and it will be argued that perceived subjective and objective strain contributed to Breivik's actions. More specifically, the subjective strains he experienced included social isolation and poor parental relationships. Conversely, objective strains provide an analysis of how Anders Breivik and others like him perceive their privileged position as being strained by migration and increasingly liberal gender norms. This analysis concludes with suggesting a role for social work in deescalating far right movements in Western liberal democracies.

Introduction

On July 22nd, 2011, the terrorist attack committed by Anders Breivik in Oslo and Utøya island in Norway resulted in the deaths of 77 people and injured more than 40 others (Leonard, Annas, Knoll & Tørrissen, 2014; Richards, 2014). In the aftermath of the attacks, the motives behind Breivik's violence became the subject of in-depth investigation. This investigation was marked by contention. Originally, psychiatrists claimed Breivik to be mentally ill and therefore not criminally responsible for his actions. Eventually, however, following a second psychiatric evaluation, this assessment was overturned, and Breivik was found criminally responsible for his crimes (Tietze, 2014) and sentenced to 21 years in prison. While Breivik has been held criminally responsible for his terrorist actions, his motivations and the circumstances which led him to take these actions remain a site of much inquiry. Throughout this paper, I will argue that the actions of Anders Breivik in Norway can be best explained by the strains he experienced in his life, such as parental rejection, and threats to his White male privilege. Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory and the concept of anomie provide a theoretical modality for understanding Breivik's actions based on his life circumstances, the clearest personal strain being the parental rejection he experienced. Additionally, it appears that Breivik also experienced a more contextual type of strain: that his hegemony as a White man was being challenged in the context of an increasingly liberal Norwegian society.

In spite of using Breivik's situation as a case study for this analysis, General Strain Theory is a theoretical tool that can help explain different types of contemporary violence committed by White heterosexual men to target minority groups. In Christchurch, New

Zealand, for example, Brenton Tarrant attacked two mosques and killed approximately 50 Muslims. He fits a similar profile to Breivik as he also experienced periods of unemployment and expressed his perception that White Europeans were becoming a 'minority' within Western countries (Walden, 2019). Recently in Canada, murder suspects Kam McLeod and Bryer Schmegelsky were described as having links to neo-Nazi groups and even publicly displayed their support for Adolf Hitler (Shakeri, 2019). Another instance occurred more recently in August 2019 in the United States, where Patrick Crusius killed 22 shoppers at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. Similarly, his manifesto targeted a minority group: Hispanic Americans. Similarly, Crusius was also very critical of immigration and was often described as a 'loner' (Gamboa, 2019). These cases indicate the scale and imminence of the threat of far-right extremism among those with privileged social identities. Importantly, in all of these cases, including Breivik's, the conclusions brought forth by this analysis are meant to be correlational rather than causal.

Although it is an incredibly useful theoretical framework for understanding crime, General Strain Theory is not without its limitations, particularly that the amount of applications makes it difficult to narrow down types of strain (Agnew, 2001, p.320). This application also has implications for the field of social work especially around the reduction of anomie, which will be explored in this paper.

Biography of Anders Breivik

In order to fully understand Anders Breivik's actions within the context of strain theory it is important to outline his personal history. Anders Breivik was born in London, England on February 13, 1979 to two Norwegian parents; his mother was a nurse and his father was a diplomat. His parents divorced when Anders was one and his father moved to Paris to be with his second wife (BBC, 2012). After this time, his relationship with his father became increasingly strained. Anders soon relocated back to Norway to live with his mother following the divorce (Pantucci, 2011). During Breivik's childhood, his mother struggled to care for him due to his difficult temperament. His behaviour was aggressive and unpredictable; for example, Breivik has stated that he assaulted both his mother and sister, eventually leading to his mother's decision to request the help of the Norwegian child welfare services. Although experts from the child welfare agency were concerned that his behaviours may become increasingly psychopathic with age, they decided not to take him out of his mother's care (Melle, 2013). In 1984, one year after becoming involved with Anders, they stopped monitoring his situation altogether as his case was deemed to not "merit urgency" (Olsen, 2016).

Breivik's time as a teenager was also marked by turmoil and isolation. Breivik claimed to have taken part in the graffiti scene in Oslo. He eventually left that scene and developed a greater interest in politics and became a member of the Progress Party Youth Organization, which was associated with the Norwegian Progress party, which was known to support Neo-Liberal values and opposition to immigration. In the process of his shifting interests, and despite his academic success, Breivik dropped out of his high school at the age of 19, prior to graduation (Melle, 2013; The Local, 2015). After dropping out, Breivik also became interested in running for the Oslo city council. Despite his struggle in making friends, he was able to make one close friend, Arsalan, who was originally from Pakistan. This friendship ultimately ended for Breivik due to a conflict (Pantucci, 2011).

Although Breivik lived on his own for a period of time, he eventually moved back home. His relationship with his mother and sister is also described as poor, particularly at this time in Breivik's life. In order to keep busy, he started various businesses. He first tried to sell commercial space and failed (Buruma, 2015). Next, he embarked on a business venture to sell forged university degrees, and although originally successful, concerns arose regarding the authorities discovering his illegal business, leading to its eventual failure (BBC, 2012).

After his failed business ventures, Breivik became increasingly isolated and largely focused on journaling his ideological standpoints on issues of immigration and European politics. Breivik spent his time journaling his beliefs and organizing his plan of attack; his journaling became increasingly frequent over the couple of years before the attacks. Indeed, several reports point to the fact that Breivik was seemingly addicted to talking about politics (Pantucci, 2011; Seierstad, 2015). He became increasingly separated from his small group of friends and lied to them about where he was spending his free time (Pantucci, 2011).

Ideology & Manifesto

Arguably, the best way to gain insight into Breivik's ideology is to examine his manifesto, titled "2083: A European Declaration of Independence" (Rahman, Resnick & Harry, 2016). His manifesto largely discussed ideology, information for terrorists and provided an autobiography (Seierstad, 2015). Analyzing the general ideas provides insight into the origins of his ideology (Tietze, 2014).

The general ideology that Breivik critiques in his manifesto is what he refers to as 'cultural Marxism'. Cultural Marxism is predominantly used to represent values that Billing & Stålne (2011) describe as part of the "post-modern" system (p.152). This system promotes "tolerance, diversity, multiculturalism, feminism, and deconstruction of the traditional Christian values" (Billing & Stålne, 2011, p. 152). In Breivik's manifesto, he openly criticizes scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm, and Jacques Derrida for creating the ideological base for cultural Marxism (Richards, 2014, p.45). In essence, Breivik is arguing in favour of "traditional values" which emphasize Christianity and the existence of a single truth imbedded in conservative western values (Billing & Stålne, 2011). Based on Breivik's analysis and support for traditional values, he demonizes Muslims and criticizes Scandinavia's flexible gender norms (Billing & Stålne, 2011).

One of Breivik's strongest opinions was his general critique of multiculturalism, and his particular disdain for Muslim immigration. He argued that an increasing Muslim population will inevitably lead to conflict in Europe. In order to avoid this perceived conflict, Breivik argued that Western civilization must re-establish an army, similar to medieval times, to fight Islam. As part of this war against Islam, Breivik argued that European institutions should not be relied on, as they have been tainted by Muslim influences; this position is widely known as the "Eurabia" conspiracy theory (Jackson, 2013). Despite his criticism, Breivik also framed Muslims as an example of the conservatism that he hoped to develop in Europe (Richards, 2014). For example, he described Islam as "the only vibrant ideology available to those in search of meaning," (Richards, 2014, p.44).

Another concern in Breivik's attack on 'cultural Marxism' was the flexible gender norms present in Scandinavian culture. Breivik argued that these gender norms, which were

influenced by homosexuality and feminism, sought to destroy the hegemony of the European male identity. He also viewed these gender norms as intrinsically tied to the welfare state, which he also criticized (Jackson, 2013). According to Breivik, the ultimate goal of these contemporary gender norms is androgyny.

July 2011 Attacks

Although Breivik planned his attacks over several years, the events on July 22nd unfolded quite rapidly. The attacks largely took place in two locations, including the bombing of the government quarter in Oslo and an attack towards a Labour Party youth event on an island near Oslo, named Utøya (Seierstad, 2015). In between planting the bomb in Hammersborg torg and his attack on Utøya, Breivik spent time disseminating his manifesto. In order to disseminate this manifesto, which provided his reasoning for his actions, Breivik sent his writings to thousands of people from different parts of the world that he considered as potential allies (Berntzen & Sandberg, 2014).

The first part of Breivik's attacks included detonating bombs in Oslo's government quarter. Early on the morning of Friday, July 22nd, 2011, Breivik parked a van filled with explosives outside of Hammersborg torg (Government Quarter) (Seierstad, 2015). Fortunately, despite being the workplace of many Norwegian civil servants, many had left work early as it was a Friday. This meant that the amount of people injured by the blast was lower than would have been on another day of the week. The bomb was detonated at approximately 15:25 local time and ended up killing eight people and critically injuring several others (Melle, 2015).

His second target, two hours after the bombs had been detonated in downtown Oslo, was on Utøya, where the Workers' Youth League was holding an event (Billing & Stålne, 2011; Melle, 2013). Around 700 people were present at Utøya at that time (CNN, 2018). In the period after detonating the bomb in Hammersborg torg, Breivik went undercover, dressing as a police officer on his way to Utøya. Once arriving on the island, Breivik used this disguise strategically in order to convince people to come out of hiding as he shot at people indiscriminately over the period of an hour. Breivik was eventually apprehended by the Norwegian police. Partially due to the slow response of the Norwegian police, this rampage resulted in the deaths of sixty-nine more individuals, many of them young adults. Many of those who survived sustained severe injuries due to the type of weapon used by Breivik (Melle, 2013).

Breivik's targets were strategic and reflected the beliefs he espoused in his manifesto. He attacked buildings where members of the governing Norwegian Labour Party worked and killed young Norwegians who considered themselves part of the Norwegian labour movement. In this sense, the youth on Utøya were "celebrat[ing] their permissive ideology and plan for its continued success," and his plan was to rid the world of this influence (Richards, 2014, p.45).

Psychiatric Evaluation

One of the largest controversies regarding Breivik was whether his actions could be explained by mental illness. Significantly, if his actions were explainable by mental illness then he would not be found criminally responsible for his actions. In the case that Breivik

was found to be mentally ill, it would allow Norwegians and Westerners generally to distance themselves from his actions. This investigation was initiated automatically as Norwegian law states that the court has a responsibility to prove that a defendant was not psychotic at the time of their crimes and therefore can be held legally responsible for their crimes. In Norway, a pair of forensic psychiatric experts are typically assigned to examine suspects for mental illness (Melle, 2013).

This first group of experts found Breivik to not be criminally responsible for his crimes due to mental illness. In order to come to this conclusion, the pair of psychiatrists spent long hours interviewing Breivik and his mother. In the process, they learned about Breivik's view of himself as a protector of the Christian faith and that he even "compared his situation to that of Tsar Nicholas of Russia and Queen Isabella of Spain," (Melle, 2013, p.17). Although the team of psychiatrists recognized that Breivik was not the only person experiencing paranoid beliefs about Muslims taking over Europe, they argued that he had "grandiose delusions" about his importance to the right-wing populist movement (Melle, 2013, p.18). The delusions, even without hallucinations, convinced the psychiatrists that Breivik was psychotic and therefore not responsible for his crimes. This conclusion caused public outcry in Norway and sparked a sense of disillusionment with the Norwegian justice system (Melle, 2013).

Approximately five months later, the Norwegian court responsible for determining Breivik's guilt ordered a second psychiatric evaluation. Similar to the first team of experts, they found that Breivik exhibited some narcissistic personality traits. Despite these narcissistic traits, however, they found that Breivik not only defended his ideas clearly, but also exercised personal agency and intent. This team of psychiatrists concluded that although Breivik may suffer from mental illness, he was not psychotic. This meant that he was criminally responsible for his crimes (Melle, 2013; Rahman, Resnick & Harry, 2016). Arguably this group of psychiatrists provided a more thorough evaluation of the issue at hand. This is illustrated by Berntzen & Sandberg (2014), who provide an overview of how Breivik's Islamophobic beliefs were actually quite common among Norwegians.

Methodology

General Strain Theory (GST)

General Strain Theory (GST) was introduced by American criminologist Robert Agnew. The origins of this theory include sociologist Robert Merton's Strain Theory which argued that individuals experience strain if they do not achieve socially-mandated economic success and become part of the middle class of society (Oxford University, 2015).

General Strain Theory (GST) takes strain theory to a much broader level of analysis. This theory describes how the existence of 'stressors', 'strains' and failure to attain certain goals contributes to criminal activity (Agnew, 2001, p.319). Broadly, strain is defined as actions towards an individual that are interpreted as maltreatment by that individual. This may also involve the loss of something considered 'good' or wholesome (Agnew, 2010). Agnew (2001) differentiates between what he refers to as "objective strains" and "subjective strains" (p. 320). The differences between these types of strains are highlighted within the context of Breivik and his manifesto.

The strains most likely to lead to crime have also been examined in the literature. In general, Agnew (2001) notes that strains most likely to lead to crime share several common, subjectively-constructed characteristics. These subjective characteristics include an individual's sense that the strain is unjust, a perception that the strain is of high intensity, and a belief that the strain is somehow related to elements of low social control. Additionally, strains are most likely to lead to crime if individuals lack the ability to cope with the strain. For example, these individuals may lack the adequate social support to cope with the strains that they are experiencing, which might lead them to crime (Agnew, 2001).

Agnew (2010) examined how GST might be adapted to examine terrorism. His research suggests that strains which are most likely to contribute to terrorism are viewed as unjust, and this injustice is perceived as being caused by an external person or group. Importantly, the impact on civilians may be due to the strain being viewed as a menace to "core identities, values and goals," (p. 137). Furthermore, one objective strain that is noted to contribute to the development of terrorism is strain that impacts the hegemony of "white, male heterosexuals," (Agnew, 2010, p. 133). Often, this strain is exacerbated by growing support for civil and human rights for people who do not fit into this category. This construction of objective strain on hegemony is highly related to the anomie of the most privileged in society (i.e. white, male, heterosexuals).

Anomie

Anomie was a concept introduced by sociologist Emile Durkheim and works as a complementary theory to general strain theory. It describes a condition in society where individuals do not adhere to the common morals and ethics of that society. Anomie is caused by a society's lack of integrative function, which serves a function of moral guidance over individuals (Dingley, 2010). The analysis of anomie is critical when considering strain theory as it provides further support for how strain may contribute to crime. Members of society become increasingly interested in achieving selfish, individual goals rather than those that support the collective (Brezina, 2012).

In this sense, individuals like Breivik, who engage in terrorism or harm others justify this violence by inciting panic in order to rationalize their moral framework (Vogt Isaksen, 2013). In the case of Breivik, he dropped out of high school and had very few friends which arguably contributed to anomie in his case (Melle, 2013). Without this social regulation, Breivik was able to deviate from the greater Norwegian moral framework.

In order to avoid anomie, reintegration into the societal moral framework is critical. This prevents what Dingley (2010) refers to as "excessive individualism," (p. 100). According to Durkheim, education provides a very useful tool to reintegrate an individual back into society (Dingley, 2010). The necessity of preventing and managing anomie will be analyzed further in the "implications for social work" section of this essay.

Strain & Anders Breivik

Subjective Strains

Subjective strains describe conditions which are viewed negatively by the individual experiencing them. In this sense, the individual is constructing the strain as a negative event. The impact of subjective strain may therefore increase based on individual circumstances

(e.g. personality, lack of social support, etc) (Agnew, 2001). In the context of Anders Breivik, strains including parental rejection can be analyzed in conjunction with social isolation.

Parental rejection & abuse

Parental rejection is a crucial strain that was present in Anders Breivik's life. Breivik experienced parental rejection most clearly by his father. As noted earlier in the essay, Breivik's mother and father had divorced when he was young and lived in different areas in Europe. Throughout his life, Breivik and his father, Jens, had always had a tenuous relationship; Jens especially disapproved of his involvement in the graffiti scene in Oslo. Breivik was caught by the police on several occasions and as Seierstad (2015) describes "after his third arrest, Jens Breivik made it clear to Anders that he wanted nothing more to do with him. His son had broken his promise to give up tagging... he would never see his father again," (p.69). After this point in time, Jens created distance with his son because of his struggles and largely blames Anders for not connecting with him (Billing & Stålne, 2011). Billing & Stålne (2011) take this argument further and argue that Breivik was unable to develop a healthy masculine identity due to the lack of his father's presence. Arguably, this is an incorrect assumption as children with two male or two female parents are no more likely to commit crime than those raised by a heterosexual couple (e.g. Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2000). It is also important to note that in relation to general strain theory, parental rejection is considered to have a strong association to crime (Agnew, 2001).

Breivik also was deeply impacted by the abusive relationship which he had with his mother. This abusive relationship took many different forms throughout Breivik's life. Most notably, she physically abused Breivik and demonized him by viewing him as an aggressive presence from a young age, which set up a negative relationship. Additionally, she has been noted as telling Breivik that she wished for his death (Orange, 2012). There is also empirical support that parental abuse serves as a strain, which contributes to criminality (Agnew, 2001).

It is also important to consider the lack of social support that Breivik received to cope with this rejection. As Agnew (2001) argues, a lack of social support can exacerbate strain. In Breivik's case he did not have many friends and eventually became quite socially isolated before committing his attacks (Seierstad, 2015).

Perceived Objective Strains

Objective strain refers to conditions that are considered negative by someone and other individuals who share a common group membership. For example, discrimination against gay and lesbians would fall into this category as the strain becomes relatable due to group membership. Increasingly liberal gender norms and immigration will be analyzed as objective strains that Anders Breivik experienced and perceived as representative of society's moral ills (Agnew, 2001). These strains will be considered in their impact on the hegemony of white heterosexual men in Europe. The connection between Breivik and the greater Islamophobia movement is best illustrated by one of his biggest mentors, Peder Jensen, also known by his online pseudonym, Fjordman (Jackson, 2013).

Immigration

Non-white immigration serves as an objective strain for some communities of white heterosexual men as it challenges their hegemony. In response, as shown by Blazak (2001),

who examines racist groups led by “skinheads”, white heterosexual men who defend their hegemony often feel “heroic” or “macho” (p.91). Arguably, Breivik was part of a larger group of white men who experienced this strain on their hegemony and chose to demonize individuals who are perceived as contributing to this strain.

Muslims are often the chosen target for these white men experiencing strain and anomie. Breivik’s beliefs illustrated the perceived propensity of Muslim immigration to Norway and what this meant for the country. Breivik strongly believed that in less than 100 years more than half of the Norwegian population will adhere to Islam; which appears to be a significant overestimation (Richards, 2014). Breivik and other white nationalist men fear that this will have grave implications for Norwegian national identity and its association with ‘whiteness’. Indeed, Breivik considered this demographic change to contribute to “great human suffering” (Richards, 2014, p.43). For example, Fjordman makes the direct connection between Islamophobic constructions of Muslims as a threat to white privilege, writing, “the massive wave of violence and especially rapes in Western cities now is a form of warfare... and it’s about time it is recognized as such,” (Jackson, 2013, p.256). This threat often leads members of this movement to conclude that Muslims should be banned from Western society altogether and are worthy of harsh punishment (Jackson, 2013).

Gender Norms

The hegemony of white heterosexual men constructs threat as anything that does not fit into this normative category. Traditional gender norms generally work to sustain this hegemony. The preservation of traditional gender norms is also connected to protection against external ‘enemies’. As illustrated by a post by Fjordman posted online:

for all that talk about ‘girl power’ and ‘women kicking ass’ which you see on movies these days, if the men of your ‘tribe’ are too weak or demoralized to protect you, you will be enslaved and crushed by the men from other ‘tribes’ before you can say ‘Vagina Monologues’ (Jackson, 2013, p. 260).

This quote extracted from a post by Fjordman posted online illustrates how feminism or gender equality is demonized by white heterosexual men experiencing anomie. Breivik illustrates this connection as well by claiming that feminism’s primary objective is to “destroy the hegemony of white males” (Richards, 2014, p.45). Feminism, in combination with other liberalizing forces such as homosexuality and matriarchy, are constructed and framed as a deep threat to the hegemony of European white heterosexual men (Richards, 2014).

Implications for Social Work

One implication for the field of social work is to recognize the impact that anomie has on society, and as a result of this recognition, strive to reduce it. This is especially true in societies that value equality and emphasize the welfare state, as white men will feel threatened by increasing competition from minorities (Blazak, 2001). Blazak (2001) argues that in order to address this, society must focus on getting rid of identity binaries (e.g. male-female, etc), as these binaries automatically construct one group as superior to the other. This view is more likely to gain support if individuals are provided with an ability to meet the socially-sanctioned economic and social goals; in the United States this would be referred to

as the 'American dream' (Blazak, 2001). Of course, a welfare state implies a greater sense of equality among people, but as illustrated by the circumstances of Anders Breivik, there is still room for improvement. Arguably, social workers can help connect individuals to the resources needed to achieve socially-sanctioned goals and therefore reduce this cultural anomie.

Advocating for the rights and freedoms of minorities and disadvantaged individuals would also be an important role for social workers. As this analysis has shown, Muslims, gay men and women, and feminists are constructed as threats and therefore become subject to scrutiny (e.g. Jackson, 2013). In the advocacy work of social workers, these constructions should be challenged and problematized. Structural social work practice provides an opportunity to advocate for clients in this way (Lundy, 2011).

Limitations and Further Research

Despite the feasibility and relevance of this analysis, it also has some limitations. Firstly, the question remains why some straight White men commit crimes linked to their perception of generalized or subjective strain and others do not. Although this is a sizeable concern, it is worth noting that the goal of this analysis is largely to provide *modus operandi* for understanding far-right extremism among this group of men. Other limitations associated with this study relate to strain

Strain theory provides a useful tool to understand and assess how stresses in an individual's life can lead them to coping through criminal activity. Despite its usefulness, it is certainly not without its limitations. One considerable limitation is the generality of the theory itself. It can be really applied to any circumstance, which provides little direction for researchers (Agnew, 2001). Secondly, it might seem that certain objective strains blame certain disadvantaged groups for this strain. Arguably, strain is therefore not always necessarily negative. For example, immigration might cause strain to white male hegemony, but this strain does not necessarily have negative connotations.

Conclusion

Through understanding the strains in Anders Breivik's life such as parental rejection and threats to his hegemony as a white man it is possible to gather a greater understanding of the reasons behind his crimes. Parental rejection and abandonment were a significant part of Anders Breivik's life. Between the abuse he experienced at the hand of his mother, and distance created by his father he lacked necessary parental attachment and affection. Objective strains experienced by white heterosexual men can provide an explanation of Breivik's rationale. Notable threats to white male hegemony as seen by Breivik and other white men who part of this wider movement include immigrants and liberal gender norms. Critically, this analysis does not excuse Breivik of his crimes, but it allows us to understand how this type of violence can be prevented. Given the reoccurrence of heinous crimes committed against marginalized groups of individuals, it is crucial to consider the ways that anomie can be addressed. This type of analysis has proven to be relevant time after time. Most recently, this analysis would allow experts and general society to understand the societal conditions behind the recent April 2019 mosque attacks in New Zealand and race-motivated violence in El Paso, Texas. Social workers can play an important role in not only reducing the anomie experienced by White men, but also in advocating for disadvantaged groups of individuals experiencing aversion in society.

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