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Psychiatric Delusions in the Political World

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Abstract. This article describes an important shortfall in the most common approach to psychological assessment by mental health professionals.

The New York Times reports that the United States (US) Department of Labor has concluded that psychiatrists may have inappropriately found that a "whistleblower" publicly alleging safety problems at a nuclear power plant was manifesting "paranoid delusions." Yet the Times suggests that the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission may have concluded that the role of the psychiatrists was not inappropriate or at least was not effected or significantly influenced by the individuals against whom the allegations were made.

In a separate but related story, the Times reports that psychiatrists may be wrongly in recommending that a would-be assassin of US President Reagan be released for unsupervised daylong visits with his parents. But the psychiatrists seem to be remaining adamant in their position.

Apart from corruption, venality, outright incompetence, and some special lacuna in the training of otherwise able psychiatrists, there is another significant issue that may color the possible reality of inappropriate psychiatric decision making. This is the peculiarly atomistic and apolitical nature of psychological assessment as practiced by many mental health professionals.

In the case of the would-be assassin, it seems that the assessors are basing their decision on samples of behavior in sociopolitical situations different from that in which violence occurred. For example, the assessee has lived in a minimum-security ward, has been walking unescorted through hospital grounds, cooperates with treatment, and has taken field trips to restaurants and shopping malls under hospital staff supervision--all without untoward incident. From such behaviors, the assessee is being judged without danger to himself or others for unsupervised daylong visits with his parents. The control aspects of supervision versus nonsupervision are being ignored--as if reified traits are prepotent to the most intense stimulus pull of the most varied situations.

In the case of the whistleblower, the assessors apparently did not consider that other employees had made similar safety complaints, that there may have been a work culture in which safety complaints were strongly discouraged, and that previous investigations finding no safety problems may have been superficial or subverted. Moreover, the assessors seem to have accepted opinions provided to them that the whistleblower was sometimes not reasonable because he did not cease his complaints or because he at time changed the nature of his complaints. The assessors did not seem to consider that the assessee may have indeed been correct, morally driven, or motivated to change the nature of complaints based on new information.

Mental health professionals often receive the most sophisticated training as to the latest findings in biological, psychometric, and interview approaches to assessment. But as to the integrated sociopolitical context in which human behavior is conceived, plotted, and effected--a context as old as human life itself--training is inadequate if it exists at all. Does this facilitate the delusional assessing the delusional?

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(See John Hinckley's request. (April 12, 2000). The New York Times, p. A30; Koopman, C. (1997). Political psychology as a lens for viewing traumatic events. *Political Psychology*, 18, 831-847; Prilleltensky, I. (1998). Values and assumptions about values and assumptions. *American Psychologist*, 53, 325-326; Prilleltensky, I. (1996). Human, moral, and political values for an emancipatory psychology. *Humanistic Psychologist*, 24, 307-324; Wald, M.L. (April 11, 2000). Questioning whistle-blower's 'delusions', The New York Times, p. A21. (Keywords: Delusions, Psychological Assessment.)