

Hate Crimes, Stress and Bigotry in the Late Twentieth Century: Where Are We Headed?

Tony Brown

Five White high school seniors in Greenwich, Connecticut were suspended after a series of random looking messages in their yearbook was found to be a message of racial hatred. If they had not bragged, their encoded message “kill” “all” “ni” “gg” “ERS” may not have been discovered.

After seeing Mississippi Burning, a group of young African American men in Kenosha, Wisconsin decided to jump a white youth. This group of angry teenagers beat and kick their 14 year old white victim so badly that he suffered permanent brain damage.

A man hissed at, and twisted the arm of a blind woman who was descending to the subway in Washington, D. C. After spitting on her, he threw her cane down the escalator steps and growled, “You people belong in concentration camps”.

Three young White males pled guilty in federal court to conspiring to burn and burning two all-Black Churches in rural southern Mississippi. While committing these acts, they were heard yelling, ‘burn niggers, burn!’.

Late one fall night in Dallas, Texas, members of the Confederate Hammerskins (CHS) vandalized a Jewish community center, and an Islamic mosque. Hideous symbols of hate are spray-painted, windows were broken and walls were riddled with bullets.

While walking home after a dinner in downtown Toronto, a young man was knocked to the ground by a gay basher’s punch which dislodged and rotated several of the young man’s teeth. His male partner was repeatedly kicked in the face and stomach raising bruises the size of grapefruits. His assailants were heard yelling ‘faggots’ during the attack.

Scenarios like these are becoming more commonplace in news reports across the nation. Individuals and organized groups motivated by hate and bigotry are mercilessly attacking individuals and property. I propose that the acts are indicative of a growing, covert intolerance, insensitivity and xenophobia.

What Is An 'Official' Hate Crime?

A hate crime is officially defined as illegal activity that is motivated by perceptions of difference in race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (McDevitt & Levin 1993; “Hate Crime Statistics Act” 1992). Recently, disability status was added as a category to the list of motivating characteristics for bias motivated activity (Wolfe 1995). Also

many national groups are pushing to get gender included on this list (Angelari 1994; Copeland & Wolf 1991). This bias motivated activity can be directed against persons, families, groups or organizations. Sometimes the criminal behavior may not involve any interpersonal contact, but instead involve property crimes. For example, swastikas may be painted on a synagogue, or a cross may be burned on someone's lawn. Most perpetrators of hate activity see their criminal behavior as acceptable given that the victim(s) belong to a socially disadvantaged or despised group.

McDevitt and Levin (1993) created a typology of bias motivated activity. The first category of hate crimes can be labelled 'thrill-seeking'. The perpetrator(s) of a thrill seeking hate crime are often bored, and are looking for excitement in assaulting someone who is not a member of their in-group. Victims are generally chosen on a random basis. The utter randomness of these thrill-seeking hate crimes makes their consequences especially troubling, and can lead to individuals and communities experiencing a sense of vulnerability. McDevitt and Levin (1993,1995) propose that about two-thirds of bias motivated activity falls into this category. The second category can be identified as 'defensive' or 'reactive'. These types of bias motivated activity are often precipitated by a specific incident. Perpetrators are directing their anger and frustration toward an 'outsider' who encroaches upon their neighborhood, means of livelihood, or way of life by being spatially proximate. Reactive hate crimes are meant to send a message (e. g. African Americans are not wanted in this neighborhood, lesbians should not attend this church). This type of bias motivated activity often escalates until the warning is heeded. It is estimated that a little over a third of hate crimes fall into this category. The third classification of bias motivated activity are carried out by individuals on a 'mission'. This is the rarest type, representing about one percent of all reported activities. Perpetrators of these acts believe they are responsible for eradicating the despised group from the world. The activities of militia that espouse racial genocide and ethnic cleansing are exemplary of these types of hate crimes. The academic work on bias-motivated activity tends to focus on hate groups and extremist organizations, although such groups are responsible for only 3-7% of bias motivated activity that is reported (McDevitt & Levin 1993; Garofalo 1991). At least 48 states had specific statutes concerning hate activity in 1992 (Czajkoski 1992).

Identifying a Hate Crime: Conceptual Complexities and Data Dilemmas

Proving prejudicial motive has been the hardest part of identifying hate crimes, and the most contested part of prescriptive legislation (Morsch 1992; Jacobs 1993). Some localities, like Baltimore County, actually keep track of criminal and non-criminal activities (Wesler & Marx 1986). Another difficulty facing hate crime identification is presented by those group of people who feel that their first amendment right to free speech is being violated (Jacobs 1993; Morsch 1992; Dority 1994). These freedom of speech proponents believe that crimes should be punished, but that attaching a more severe penalty to a crime motivated by bias is unconstitutional. Moreover, they suggest that biased motivation cannot always be proven. One relevant example comes from a public campground near Columbus Ohio in 1989 (Birnbaum 1993). An African American camper complained to a park ranger about loud music coming from a nearby campsite. The park ranger left after reprimanding the White camper. Once the ranger was out of earshot, the White repeatedly shouted racial epithets and verbally threatened to be violent. He was eventually charged with and convicted of aggravated menacing, a misdemeanor that could be punishable with 18 months in jail. Some people use this case as an example of law and legislation going too far in an unrealistic and moralistic effort to eliminate bigotry.

Prior to 1992, there were few reliable sources of national data or state level data on bias motivated activity. Reliable data could not be obtained because of a lack of standardization in measurement of hate crimes. There was operational confusion about what constituted a hate crime, and different institutional arrangements for estimating incidence across state lines, and within local jurisdictions. Various important distinctions must be recognized in the quality of the criminal actions for it to be called bias motivated activity. And the criteria for assessing the occurrence of hate crimes differed in the few states which monitored crimes prior to 1992 (Hate Crime Statistics Act 1992; Martin 1995). It becomes very difficult to make critical decisions about what a hate crime is if there are not detailed decision rules. For example, if during a barroom fight the combatants use racial epithets against each other, the event cannot be classified as a hate crime because it is uncertain if a prescribed hatred precipitated the assault.

Who Does What, When and Where: Perpetrators and Victims of Hate Crimes

The federal government has been instrumental in helping to understand and estimate the prevalence of hate activity. The Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1992

mandates that data be collected concerning crimes that manifest evidence of prejudicial motivation based upon race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disabilities. In anticipation of the passage of this Act, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) developed an outline of hate crime data collection guidelines in 1990, and has held training conferences for state and local law enforcement agencies that are responsible for enforcing statutes. And the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program was expanded to include bias motivated activity. Thus the federal government has come up with detailed decision rules, and trained groups of police officers to be directors of bias motivated crime sections in their respective local jurisdictions.

There are various combinations of victim and perpetrator, and multiple statuses (e. g. Asian homosexual) that make it difficult for police officers to be accurate about an offender's motivation in every case. The limited data available on victimization suggests that most hate crimes occur because of race and ethnicity, followed by religion, and sexual orientation (Sanchez and Castenda 1994). Data on offenses based upon the victim's disability are not currently released. Research (Berk, 1990; Czajkoski, 1992) on hate crime activity suggests males are most likely victim(s) and offender(s). Sanchez and Castenda (1994) reported that African Americans were most likely to be victims, and there is some evidence of reciprocity between White and Black offenders/victims (Garofalo 1991). Young people are overrepresented among those actually charged with a crime (Pinderhughes 1993; McDevitt & Levin 1993; Czajkoski 1992; Berk 1990). Typically there is a two:one ratio between perpetrators and victim, and incidents are more likely to occur in the evening. The perpetrator tends to be a stranger who lives outside of the residence area of the victim, and who has not committed a crime before. The frequency of reported bias motivated activity has been increasing since 1990, as has the severity of the acts. More fatalities and major injuries have been reported in the commission of bias motivated acts (Berk 1990) although the rate of severe violence is still below rates for comparable non-bias crimes. As with the majority of crimes, there is significant underreporting error. Because of the demeaning nature of bias motivated victimization, researchers estimate that between 85 to 95% of bias motivated crimes go unreported.

The media tends to focus upon the sensational acts of bias, that is, nationally known hate crimes, which are not representative of the minor infractions that occur on the everyday basis. Typically most bias motivated activity involves small scale assaults, menacing, reckless endangerment, harassment, criminal mischief, robbery, vandalism

and burglary. Data collected in New York suggest that the type of crime varies significantly by type of bias. For instance, about 90% of the racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation crimes were directed against individuals, while this was the case for about 30% of the religion motivated acts (Garofalo 1991).

Many issues are raised in the literature that require systematic study in the future. For example, researchers need to identify and examine the macro-level forces that may be associated with increased hate activity (e. g. economic downturns, increased interaction between different groups, political climate changes, increased public protests). Very detailed work is needed that explores the mental and emotional consequences for the offender and the victim. As more accurate statistics about the prevalence of bias motivated activity is collected, work in this area should focus upon comparisons of bias motivated activity and non-bias motivated activity.

Homosexuals, lesbians, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and the disabled experience distress because of the random, and often violent expressions of hate that occur in the United States. In the following section, the implicit relationship between hate crimes and stress will be explored for African American victims and perpetrators. It should also be noted that the following discussion does apply to many of the disadvantaged groups that are targets as well as perpetrators of hate crimes.

Hate Crimes, Stress and African Americans

There is a large body of literature that examines the emotional consequences of stressful life events, chronic strains, and daily hassles for African Americans. Unfortunately, this work often omits that stress which can occur because of racial antagonism (Thoits 1983; Pearlin 1981; Williams et. al. 1994; Outlaw 1993). But researchers are beginning to find that African Americans experience a broad range of negative stressors that are linked to their position in the social structure. Hate crimes are one indicator of this type of racialized stress. Sanchez and Castenda (1994) report that hate activity where African Americans are victimized have increased dramatically from the early 1990s. Moreover, African Americans are the only group of persons categorized in significant numbers as both victims and perpetrators of hate crimes (Martin 1995; Pinderhughes 1993; Czajkoski 1992). This trend is disturbing because stressful events that occur to members in one's close network can have health consequences for other individuals (Thoits 1995). And I propose that events that occur

to individuals based upon their race alienates members of that group from the larger society, and negatively affects members by creating a stress filled atmosphere.

In a small study of the emotional and behavior responses to hate violence for individuals and their families, Barnes and Ephross (1994) support the notion that these acts are stressful. Medical treatment and physical trauma resulting from hate crimes are obviously distressing. But in addition to these physical stressors, respondents admit feeling “anger at the perpetrator, fear that family or self would be injured (again), sadness about the incident, feelings of powerlessness to do anything about the incident, suspicion of other people, fear that family or self would be killed, and feeling bad about self as a person” (Barnes & Ephross 1994:250). In terms of coping, respondents reported anticipatory avoidance behavior such as moving out of a neighborhood, decreasing social participation, buying home security systems. Victims also purchased guns and otherwise armed themselves.

The racial antagonism that underlies hate crimes creates an environment that can be distressing to African Americans as a group. The fear of bias motivated activity and sensational reports of hate activity (e. g. Rodney King) are equivalent to ambient, day to day stress for African Americans. Many hate crimes are similar to acts of individual discrimination that have occurred for centuries in this country except that these incidents violate newly written law. These activities contribute to a hostile environment in which African Americans as a community are victimized. I propose that hate crimes, and bias motivated activities affect how African Americans experience and understand their placement in the social structure.

Where Do We Go From Here?

There are several meaningful policy implications derived from this literature. First, the increases in bias-motivated actions indicates that the United States may not be moving toward the egalitarian, free-choice, and tolerant society that is idealized. College campuses, places that have traditionally been central in minimizing bigoted antagonism and increasing liberalism, are prime examples. Hate crimes on college campuses have increased by 30% from 1990 to 1991 (McDevitt & Levin 1993). Similar increasing trends can be plotted in elementary and high schools (Trebilcock 1993). Thus diversity and tolerance training are essential to combat the growing prejudices that groups and groups feel for one another. Second, we, as a community, must continue to support organizations like B’Nai B’rith, National Institute of Prejudice and

Injustice, Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Research Center, and Klanwatch. These organizations have been partly responsible for the increasing awareness of bias motivated activity. They have also been instrumental in monitoring the occurrence of hate crimes and the growth of organized hate groups. And third, researchers need to design national research projects to assess hate crime prevalence based on a random probability sample of the United States (see Herek & Berrill 1990 for an example). We need to understand the prevalence of hate activity, and the emotional consequences for perpetrators and victims. Serious effort should also be directed toward reducing underreporting error in bias motivated activity.

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