

Mental Illness Doesn't Explain Mass Violence-but Neither Does "Islamic Extremism"

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

With the latest mass shooting in Chattanooga, corporate media followed the [usual pattern](#) of being ready and willing to label violence as "terrorism" so long as the suspect is Muslim—e.g., Time's report on the shooting, "How to Stop the Next Domestic Terrorist" ([7/20/15](#))—despite questions occasionally raised about whether "terrorism" is the appropriate frame to describe attacks on military installations (e.g., Slate, [7/17/15](#)).

CNN's Anderson Cooper, talking to correspondent Gary Tuchman, recognizes that "depression" doesn't explain mass violence-but seems to suggest that "Islamic extremism" does.

At the same time, perhaps responding to critics of the [double standard](#) in treatment of Muslim mass murder suspects, US journalists did do something with reported shooter Mohammod Abdulazeez that is [often reserved](#) for white suspects with Christian backgrounds: delving into Abdulazeez's psychology and viewing his alleged crime through the lens of mental illness—as with the New York Times' report, "In Chattanooga, a Young Man on a Downward Spiral" ([7/20/15](#)).

Trying to square the terrorist narrative with the mental illness narrative, CNN's Anderson Cooper ([7/20/15](#)) came up with a peculiar question (as noted by [Sam Hussein](#)), asking correspondent Gary Tuchman:

Now, did the gunman's parents acknowledge the possibility their son committed these murders in the name of Islamic extremism? I mean, they say it's depression, but, you know, depression doesn't lead most people to kill other people.

It's true what Cooper says: Most depressed people, and people with [mental illness](#) in general, will never hurt anyone. But it's just as true that religious beliefs—"extremist" or otherwise—don't "lead most people to kill other people."

It's a sign of media failure to understand the criticisms made of terrorism coverage that Cooper doesn't recognize that "[Islamic extremism](#)" is no more a satisfying explanation of why someone might become violent than "depression" is.

Jim Naureckas is the editor of [FAIR.org](#).

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