



# **A Neurocognitive Model of Psychopathology in Violent Offending and Psychosocial Elements of a Successful Death Penalty Defense**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a neurocognitive model of psychopathology in extreme violent offending. On June 9, 2017, Brendt Christensen, a physics graduate student, kidnapped, tortured and murdered a visiting Chinese scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Due to the transnational aspect of the case coupled with the heinousness of the crime, the murder drew international headlines. Christensen had exhibited a myriad of psychopathological symptoms and had sought counseling in the days leading up to the commission of the crime. However, he was not flagged as a risk to self or others. Despite the state’s moratorium on capital punishment, the U.S. federal government assumed jurisdiction and sought the death penalty. An insanity plea was not relied upon; nevertheless, the defense introduced key psychiatric evidence at trial. The paper presents the case of Brendt Christensen as a case study, details the psychosocial elements that his defense team presented at trial that spared him the U.S. death penalty, and outlines a plausible diagnostic clarification based on neurocognitive features and current research. The paper concludes that diagnoses including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, conduct disorder, and antisocial personality fail to adequately encompass the latest neuro-research on social cognition, such as mentalizing, emotional sharing, and pro-social concern, and that these features are critical to a violence risk assessment.

**Keywords:** anti-social conduct, homicide, intellectual disability, legal insanity, violence risk