

Why would someone fake a hate crime?

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Set amidst a bitter, divisive U.S. presidential election and a steadily-growing Black Lives Matter movement, actor Jussie Smollett exploded onto center stage in early 2019 after claiming he was the target of a late-night beating at the hands two racist, homophobic Trump supporters.

The former "Empire" TV star awaits sentencing after a Chicago jury found him guilty of five counts of felony disorderly conduct for staging the attack, which could mean up to three years in prison. Even as the details emerge, many are still confused as to why the 39-year-old lied about a vicious hate crime, something that remains a constant reality for those in the LGBTQ community and those who are Black or Asian.

"As humans, we like to look for certain types of explanations of behavior. It's something that we engage in all the time," says Rory Smead, an associate professor of philosophy at Northeastern who studies spite.

"There are really only two kinds of explanations that people find satisfying. Either they did it out of some ethical or moral good, like when somebody jumps in the river to save somebody. The only other reason we find compelling is a selfish reason, that there's some kind of personal gain or something," Smead says.

Smollett claimed he was attacked at 2 a.m. on Jan. 22, 2019 by two men wearing red "Make America Great Again" hats, the ones often sported by backers of former President Donald Trump. Smollett said they poured bleach on him, put a noose around his neck, and beat him up while yelling homophobic and racist slurs. When Chicago police arrived at his apartment more than six hours later, the police bodycam footage showed Smollett wearing the noose.

Andre Hope, the lone Black juror in Smollett's trial, told WLS-TV that Smollett's claims defied common sense. He remains baffled as to why the actor faked the attack.

"I still have not figured out a motive for why he did it, why this even had to happen. He was a star," Hope says. The noose Smollett claimed his attackers put around his neck became a sticking point for both Hope and

former Chicago Police Chief Eddie Johnson.

"As an African American person, I'm not putting that noose back on at all," says Hope.

Smollett maintains his innocence and his attorney said he will appeal the jury's decision.

Smollett's high-profile staged attack and subsequent conviction makes him the latest in a list of headline-grabbing people who have pretended to be victims. Some do it in order to obtain some sort of personal or financial gain. Others claim to have a deadly illness, such as cancer. One woman pretended to be a 9/11 victim, although she never took any money from the many 9/11 victims' funds.

"It's common to use well-known events or items like the 'Make America Great Again' hat because there's instant recognition. Everybody knows about 9/11, and everybody knows about MAGA caps," says Marc Feldman, a psychologist who specializes in a personality disorder called factitious disorder, which he believes Smollett could have.

"It's a shortcut to getting the attention that these people are after and the sympathy, because there's that immediate recognition," says Feldman, who has not met or treated Smollett.

Those who fake victimization for personal gain such as money can be diagnosed as malingerers, says Hilmar von Strünck, visiting associate teaching professor of psychology at Northeastern. The [medical diagnosis](#) describes people who deceive others, usually physicians, for tangible, understandable gains, such as avoiding military duty or work. But those with factitious disorder, a similar psychological diagnosis, don't appear to get financial or personal gain—which is a little harder to understand.

"As humans, we really are very [social animals](#), and we need that human touch and connection. Sometimes when they don't get that attention, factitious disorder emerges so they can get that care they're seeking," says von Strünck, who commented on the disorder and not on Smollett's particular case.

People with factitious disorder are often looking for intangible things like attention, sympathy, and care that they feel unable to get in other, more appropriate ways, says von Strünck.

"This shows a lot of the conditioning that happens in psychology, like making associations between two stimuli. The person with factitious disorder connects being sick in a hospital with getting a lot of attention," says von Strünck.

The fact that Smollett continues to claim his innocence is also in line with the disorder, says Feldman, who has written five books about factitious disorder.

"I'm aware of literally a couple dozen factitious cancer cases, and most of them don't ever confess to telling a lie. They'll change their claims over time. One year they'll say they have terminal cancer, and three years later they're still posting about it. Sometimes they'll claim a miraculous cure. They evoke God, and say God cured them, and to question their story is to question God," says Feldman. "That's how people have wormed their way out of these lies in a surprising number of cases."

Brooks Ayers, a man who dated one of the women on the "Real Housewives of Orange County," claimed to be diagnosed with stage 3 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2013. Despite later admitting he faked chemotherapy bills that he had used as proof of his illness, Ayers continues to suggest that he was diagnosed with cancer.

"There's no face-saving way for them to exit a situation like this," says Feldman, pointing out that Smollett had no logical alternative explanation for his actions. "So, barring any other avenue for escape, he's sticking to his story. And it seems that he may have repeated the story so many times, with so much detail, that it's become what I've called quasi-delusional. He may start to believe elements of it himself."

That leaves former celebrity defenders of Smollett, such as CNN's Don Lemon, to try and distance themselves from the star's dizzying tangle of tall tales.

"He had to make up too many lies," in order to explain his assault story to police, said Lemon on "Don Lemon Tonight" shortly after Smollett's conviction.

Lemon, who's been criticized for his involvement in the case, pivoted to another damaging aspect of Smollett's claims.

"Here's what folks are concerned about—that what he did might undermine future victims, legitimate victims of hate crimes," says Lemon.

Provided by Northeastern University

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