

The “Pseudocommando” Mass Murderer

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March 2010

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Part I: The Psychology of Revenge and Obliteration

Abstract

The pseudocommando is a type of mass murderer who kills in public during the daytime, plans his offense well in advance, and comes prepared with a powerful arsenal of weapons. He has no escape planned and expects to be killed during the incident. Research suggests that the pseudocommando is driven by strong feelings of anger and resentment, flowing from beliefs about being persecuted or grossly mistreated. He views himself as carrying out a highly personal agenda of payback. Some mass murderers take special steps to send a final communication to the public or news media; these communications, to date, have received little detailed analysis. An offender's use of language may reveal important data about his state of mind, motivation, and psychopathology. Part I of this article reviews the research on the pseudocommando, as well as the psychology of revenge, with special attention to revenge fantasies. It is argued that revenge fantasies become the last refuge for the pseudocommando's mortally wounded self-esteem and ultimately enable him to commit mass murder-suicide.

... to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee... . Thus, I give up the spear!—Herman Melville [Ref.¹, p 154] ... All the [expletive] you've given me. Right back at you with hollow points.—Seung-Hui Cho²

The term pseudocommando was used by Dietz in 1986 to describe a type of mass murderer who plans his actions “after long deliberation” (Ref.³, p 482). The pseudocommando often kills indiscriminately in public during the daytime, but may also kill family members and a “pseudo-community” he believes has mistreated him.⁴ He comes

¹ Melville H: *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Northwestern–Newberry Edition of the Writings of Herman Melville. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988

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² Video manifesto. Available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859>. Accessed May 25, 2009

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³ Dietz P: Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bull N Y Acad Med* **62**:477–91, 1986

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⁴ Ibid.

prepared with a powerful arsenal of weapons and has no escape planned. He appears to be driven by strong feelings of anger and resentment, in addition to having a paranoid character. Such persons are “collectors of injustice”⁵ who nurture their wounded narcissism and retreat into a fantasy life of violence and revenge. Mullen⁶ described the results of his detailed personal evaluations of five pseudocommando mass murderers who were caught before they could kill themselves or be killed. He noted that the massacres were often well planned (i.e., the offender did not “snap”), with the offenders arriving at the crime scene heavily armed, often in camouflage or warrior gear, and that they appeared to be pursuing a highly personal agenda of payback to an uncaring, rejecting world. Both Mullen and Dietz have described this type of offender as a suspicious grudge holder who is preoccupied with firearms.

Mass killings by such individuals are not new, nor did they begin in the 1960s with Charles Whitman. The news media tend to suggest that the era of mass public killings was ushered in by Whitman atop the tower at the University of Texas at Austin and have become “a part of American life in recent decades.”⁷ Research indicates that the news media have heavily influenced the public perception of mass murder, particularly the erroneous assertion that its incidence is increasing.⁸ Furthermore, it is typically the high-profile cases that represent the most widely publicized, yet least representative mass killings. As an example that such mass murderers have existed long before Whitman, consider a notorious case, the Bath School disaster of 1927, now long forgotten by most.⁹ Andrew Kehoe lived in Michigan in the late 1920s. He struggled with serious financial problems, and his wife suffered from tuberculosis. He appeared to focus his unhappiness and resentment on a local town conflict having to do with a property tax being levied on a school building. After becoming utterly overwhelmed with resentment and hatred, Kehoe killed his wife, set his farm ablaze, and killed some 45 individuals by setting off a bomb in the school building. Kehoe himself was killed in the blast, but he left a final communication on a wooden sign outside his property

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004

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⁷ The Associated Press: *Why are mass shootings on the rise? While some see connection to guns, others blame erosion of community.* April 21, 2007. Available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18249724>. Accessed May 25, 2009

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⁸ Duwe G: A circle of distortion: the social construction of mass murder in the United States. *West Criminol Rev* **6**:59–78, 2005

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⁹ Bernstein A: *Bath Massacre: America's First School Bombing.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2009

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that read: “Criminals are made, not born”—a statement suggestive of externalization of blame and long-held grievance.

Mass Murder: A Subtype of Homicide-Suicide

Homicide-suicide (H-S) is the phenomenon in which an individual commits a homicide and subsequently (usually within 24 hours) commits suicide.^{1011–12} H-S is a distinct category of homicide with features that differ from those of other forms of killing. It is a rare event, estimated to occur at a rate of between 0.2 and 0.38 per 100,000 persons annually.¹³¹⁴ Most homicide-suicides are carefully planned by the perpetrator as a two-stage, sequential act. Marzuk *et al.*¹⁵ proposed classifying H-S by the relationship the perpetrator had to the victim (e.g., spousal, familial), along with the perpetrator’s motive (e.g., jealousy, altruism, revenge). Table 1 lists the major H-S patterns discussed in the research literature, along with brief descriptions.

Table 1. Homicide–Suicide

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- ¹⁰ Felthous A, Hempel A: Combined homicide-suicides: a review. *J Forensic Sci* **40**:846–57, 1995
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- ¹¹ Bossarte R, Simon T, Barker L: Characteristics of homicide followed by suicide incidents in multiple states, 2003–04. *Inj Prev* **12**(Suppl 2):ii33–8, 2006
Abstract/FREE Full Text
Google Scholar
- ¹² Eliason S: Murder-suicide: a review of the recent literature. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* **37**:371–6, 2009
Abstract/FREE Full Text
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- ¹³ Bossarte R, Simon T, Barker L: Characteristics of homicide followed by suicide incidents in multiple states, 2003–04. *Inj Prev* **12**(Suppl 2):ii33–8, 2006
Abstract/FREE Full Text
Google Scholar
- ¹⁴ Coid J: The epidemiology of abnormal homicide and murder followed by suicide. *Psychol Med* **13**:855–60, 1983
CrossRef
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Google Scholar
- ¹⁵ Marzuk P, Tardiff K, Hirsch C: The epidemiology of murder-suicide. *JAMA* **267**:3179–83, 1992
CrossRef
PubMed
Google Scholar

Classification

Relationship + motive

Relationship between victim and perpetrator (spousal, familial, etc.)

Motivation of perpetrator (jealousy, altruism, revenge, etc.)

Major patterns

Consortial-possessive

Most common type, accounting for 50% to 75% of all homicide-suicides. Involves a male recently estranged from his partner. Relationship often characterized by domestic abuse, multiple separations, and reunions.

Consortial-physically ailing

The perpetrator is usually an elderly man in poor health, an ailing spouse, or both. Health problems have typically resulted in financial difficulties. Depression is frequent. The motive may involve altruism or despair about the future. Suicide notes are often left describing an inability to cope with poor health and finances.

Filicide-suicide

About 40% to 60% of fathers and 16% to 29% of mothers commit suicide immediately after murdering their children. An infant is more likely to be killed by the mother. A mother who kills a neonate is unlikely to commit suicide. Further subtypes of filicide-suicide are based on motives such as psychosis, altruism, and revenge.

Familicide-suicide

Committed by a depressed senior man of the household. Associated precipitating stressors include marital problems, finances, or work-related problems. He may view his action as an altruistic “delivery” of his family from continued hardships. He may also suspect marital infidelity and be misusing substances.

Adversarial Homicide-Suicide (extrafamilial)

Involves a disgruntled ex-employee, a bullied student, or a resentful, paranoid loner. He externalizes blame onto others and feels wronged in some way. He is likely to have depression and exhibit paranoid and/or narcissistic traits. Occasionally, he may experience actual persecutory delusions. He uses a powerful arsenal of weapons and has no escape planned.

Adapted from Marzuk *et al.*¹⁶

Of the five major H-S types, the consortial-possessive type is the most common, accounting for 50 to 75 percent of all homicide-suicides. Less common is the adversarial (also called extrafamilial) type of H-S. The pseudocommando mass murderer described by Dietz¹⁷ and the perpetrator of the analogous autogenic massacre de-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dietz P: Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bull N Y Acad Med* **62**:477-91, 1986
PubMed

scribed by Mullen¹⁸ would best fit into this category. Variants of this type of H-S include disgruntled (ex-)employees, students, patients, and litigants. The pseudocommando subtype of mass murder may be considered a H-S, as the perpetrator goes to the offense expecting not only to kill, but also to be killed, sometimes by his own hand. Since he has no escape planned and may also force police to kill him, certain cases may culminate in so-called suicide by cop.¹⁹ Technically, an adversarial H-S following the pseudocommando pattern is only considered a mass murder if the perpetrator kills four or more victims at one location, within one event.²⁰ For mass murderers in general, the literature does not reflect a strong link with serious mental illness.²¹ Rather, retrospective analyses of cases suggest that, while mass murderers may have illnesses such as depression, it is rare for them to have psychosis.²²

In his case studies of five pseudocommando-type mass murderers who were apprehended alive, Mullen²³ described several traits and historical factors that these individuals had in common. In particular, they were bullied or isolated as children, turning into loners who felt despair over being socially excluded. They were generally suspicious, resentful grudge holders who demonstrated obsessional or rigid traits. Narcissistic, grandiose traits were also present, along with heavy use of externalization. They held a worldview of others being generally rejecting and uncaring. As a result, they spent a great deal of time feeling resentful and ruminating over past humiliations. Such ruminations invariably evolved into fantasies about violent revenge. Mullen noted that the offenders seemed to “welcome death,” even perceiving it as bringing them fame with an aura of power. Since most of the literature on the pseudocommando heavily

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¹⁸ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004

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¹⁹ Mohandie K, Meloy J: Clinical and forensic indicators of “suicide by cop.” *J Forensic Sci* **45**:384–9, 2000

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²⁰ Burgess AW: Mass, spree and serial homicide. In: *Crime Classification Manual (ed 2)*. Edited by Douglas J, Burgess AW, Burgess AG, *et al*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, pp 437–70

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²¹ Aitken L, Oosthuizen P, Emsley R, *et al*: Mass murders: implications for mental health professionals. *Int J Psychiatry Med* **38**:261–9, 2008

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²² Kelleher M: *Flash Point: The American Mass Murderer*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997

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²³ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004

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references the offender's motivation of revenge, a more in-depth analysis of the psychology of revenge may be helpful.

The Psychology of Revenge

He piled upon the whale's hump the sum of all the general rage and hate ... and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.—Herman Melville [Ref.²⁴, p 154]

The desire for revenge “is a ubiquitous response to narcissistic injury” (Ref.²⁵, p 447). It should be of interest that an emotion so intense and pervasive has received little study relative to other emotions. Both psychoanalysis²⁶ and forensic psychiatry have merely skimmed the psychological surface of this destructive cognition. Yet consider how revenge hides in plain sight. For example, Greek mythology is awash in revenge themes.²⁷ Revenge is the central motive in at least 20 of Shakespeare's plays and is a main theme in many of today's Hollywood movies. The success of movies such as the *Death Wish* series, and more recently the *Kill Bill* series, speaks to the public's fascination with, and indeed their delight in, “the sweet taste of payback.”²⁸ That there is a strong, primal universality of the revenge theme hardly requires in-depth socioanthropological study. Across almost every culture, the taking of revenge, when “justified,” has assumed “the status of a sacred obligation” (Ref.²⁹, p 199). In many cultures, since biblical times and before, there has always been the principle of retributive functional symmetry, such as the admonition of an eye for an eye in the Hebrew Bible.

Human aggression, as an expression of revenge, may be traced back to a psychophysiological response designed to enhance survival.³⁰ At this stage of our evolution, affronts to our self-esteem or narcissism are responded to “as though they were a threat to our

²⁴ Melville H: *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Northwestern–Newberry Edition of the Writings of Herman Melville. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988

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²⁵ Lafarge L: The wish for revenge. *Psychoanal Q* 75:447–75, 2006

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²⁶ Rosen I: Revenge: the hate that dare not speak its name—a psychoanalytic perspective. *J Am Psychoanal Assoc* 55:595–620, 2007

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²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cargill C: *Revenge is a dish best served cold*. Film.com, August 30, 2007. Available at <http://www.film.com/features/story/revenge-dish-best-served-cold/16169619>. Accessed December 12, 2009

Google Scholar

²⁹ Watson L: *Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995

Google Scholar

³⁰ McCullough M: *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008

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survival” (Ref.³¹, p 123). We have maintained the physiological hard-wiring that is available for excessive use in situations that do not involve survival of the body, but survival of the ego. The ego’s survival instinct may become transformed into a “striving for an enduring sense of self which is an object of value in a field of social meanings” (Ref.³², p 23). Because the self or ego must be defined in the social-meaning field, it is the Other on whom we depend for our highly valued identity. The individual whose ego is fragile or damaged may nurture destructive rage toward the Other that eventually transforms him into an avenger. Indeed, it is the frustration of the need to “preserve a solid sense of self,” that is often “the source of the most fanatical human violence [as well as] the everyday anger that all of us suffer” (Ref.³³, p 85).

Yet vengeful rage provides only pseudopower, as it is merely a reaction to intolerable feelings of powerlessness and humiliation. Nevertheless, there comes a point when this pseudopower is the only defense the avenger has left to ward off the annihilation of his identity. For this reason, when the potential avenger’s ego is threatened or hurt “in such a devastating way ... the only thing that remains is to persist in the ‘unremitting denunciation of injustice’ ” (Ref.³⁴, p 189). For certain individuals, there is no turning back or giving up on the “crusade,” because there is a perverse “honor” in refusing to normalize the perceived injustice. Herein lies the “hidden logic of the ... avenger” (Ref.³⁵, pp 83–4): to sustain a perversely heroic “refusal to compromise, an insistence against all odds, ’ ” lest his heroic fantasy surrender to the reality of a self (or lack thereof) that he finds intolerable (Ref.³⁶, p 190).

The psychotherapy literature on revenge suggests that fantasized revenge is a familiar cognition in daily life. In the treatment of various stress response syndromes, “clinicians may encounter intrusive and persistent thoughts of vengeance associated with feelings of rage at perpetrators” (Ref.³⁷, p 24). While the revenge fantasies often

³¹ Menninger W: Uncontained rage: a psychoanalytic perspective on violence. *Bull Menninger Clinic* **71**:115–31, 2007

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³² Leifer R: *Vinegar Into Honey: Seven Steps to Understanding and Transforming Anger, Aggression, and Violence*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2008

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³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Zizek S: *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008

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³⁵ Leifer R: *Vinegar Into Honey: Seven Steps to Understanding and Transforming Anger, Aggression, and Violence*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2008

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³⁶ Zizek S: *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008

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³⁷ Horowitz M: Understanding and ameliorating revenge fantasies in psychotherapy. *Am J Psychiatry* **164**:24–7, 2007

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have the emotional content of hate and fear, the fear may easily devolve into frank paranoia. Of relevance to the pseudocommando is the research evidence suggesting that strong anger can serve as an attention-focusing emotion, making it difficult to think about other things.³⁸ Angry thoughts thus generate a vicious cycle; “the more he thinks about them the angrier he gets, and the angrier he gets, the harder it is to think about anything else” (Ref.³⁹, p 1317). Thus, a pseudocommando’s revenge fantasy may prevent him from “engaging other strategies (e.g., trivialization) that would have allowed [him] to move on and think about something else” (Ref.⁴⁰, p 1323).

For the pseudocommando, revenge fantasies are inflexible and persistent because they provide desperately needed sustenance to his self-esteem. He is able to feel better by gaining a sense of (pseudo) power and control by ruminating on, and finally planning out his vengeance. Consider the pictures of Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech) released by the media in which he is dressed in various warrior outfits (e.g., flack jacket, black clothing, ammo belts). Next, consider the fact that he had to shop for and purchase these items and possibly try them on—all the while imagining how he would use them and how he would look in them. These fantasies may lead the avenger to “experience pleasure at imagining the suffering of the target and pride at being on the side of some spiritual primal justice” (Ref.⁴¹, p 25). Thus, the revenge fantasy falsely promises a powerful “remedy” to the pseudocommando’s shattered ego. It gives the “illusion of strength,” and a temporary, though false, sense of restored control and self-coherence.⁴²

The type of severe narcissistic rage experienced by the pseudocommando “serves the purpose of the preservation of the self” (Ref.⁴³, p 124) that has exceeded its limit of shame, rejection, and aversive self-awareness. This pain and rage cannot be contained, and he ultimately embarks “on a course of self-destruction that transfers [his] pain to others” (Ref.⁴⁴, p 128). It may ultimately be the intensity and quality of the revenge fantasies, acting in concert with other risk variables, that contribute to “whether

³⁸ Carlsmith K, Wilson T, Gilbert D: The paradoxical consequences of revenge. *J Pers Soc Psychol* **95**:1316–24, 2008

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³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Horowitz M: Understanding and ameliorating revenge fantasies in psychotherapy. *Am J Psychiatry* **164**:24–7, 2007

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⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Menninger W: Uncontained rage: a psychoanalytic perspective on violence. *Bull Menninger Clinic* **71**:115–31, 2007

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⁴⁴ Ibid.

vengefulness will be a passing concern or a lifelong quest” (Ref.⁴⁵, p 449). Dietz⁴⁶ has described these individuals as “collectors of injustice” who hold onto every perceived insult, amassing a pile of “evidence” that they have been grossly mistreated. Why might they so faithfully stockpile this collection? I argue that it serves the purpose of sustaining their revenge romance. The collection is reassembled into the form of an “enemy” who deserves to be the target of a merciless, incendiary rage. Thus, the pseudocommando maintains object relations with others that are based heavily on envy and splitting, as their collection is likely to consist of the unwanted, hated, or feared aspects of themselves. A more intense desire for revenge may signal a more intense idealization of the hated object(s). Targets of a very intense desire for revenge must be made out to be worthy of their fate, which is why we may see the pseudocommando portray his victims as barely worthy of being considered human, much as Mr. Cho portrayed other students (whom he hardly knew) as “hedonistic” “brats” who had “raped” his soul. Yet at the same time, he must view himself as blame free, thereby completing the other half of the splitting and projection dynamic.

We are now at a point where we can summarize some of the main psychic functions that the pseudocommando’s fantasy of revenge serves:

- It “provides sadistic gratification, and perhaps has an evolutionary basis” (Ref.⁴⁷, p 608).
- It helps the pseudocommando obliterate an intolerable reality and aversive self-awareness. His rumination “dominates thought and impels action much as an addiction or erotomania does” (Ref.⁴⁸, p 605). He could be said to have “fallen” into romantic/idealized hate. When Captain Ahab believed he had been “dismasted” by the whale, he reached the final stages of narcissistic inaccessibility and plunged irretrievably into a romanticized downward spiral of reality-destroying nihilism and death. The revenge fantasy serves as a defense against feelings of shame, loss, and powerlessness. In this way, revenge “is an attempt to restore the grandiose self” (Ref.⁴⁹, p 605). It allows the pseudocommando’s omnipotence to rise triumphantly (in his fantasy) from the ashes of shame and vulnerability.

⁴⁵ Lafarge L: The wish for revenge. *Psychoanal Q* **75**:447–75, 2006

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⁴⁶ Dietz P: Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bull N Y Acad Med* **62**:477–91, 1986

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⁴⁷ Rosen I: Revenge: the hate that dare not speak its name—a psychoanalytic perspective. *J Am Psychoanal Assoc* **55**:595–620, 2007

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⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

- It maintains the *status quo* of the pseudocommando’s primitive object relations, which are based heavily on envy and splitting.

The peril associated with these revenge dynamics is that they inexorably collide with reality in such a way as to render the defenses ineffectual. Reality ultimately creeps into his life in various ways, threatening him with aversive self-awareness and requiring him to feed the monster—that is, to cultivate stronger, more intense feelings of persecution and hostility toward his victims. Once this process becomes well entrenched, the pseudocommando begins to tread down the path of cognitive deconstruction, nihilism, and death.

Pseudocommando Psychodynamics: Persecution, Envy, and Nihilism

They do me wrong, and I will not endure it... . I must be held a rancorous enemy.—Richard III⁵⁰

Having discussed how the pseudocommando’s wish for revenge represents his struggle to restore a “damaged” identity, I now focus on the developmental psychodynamics observed in many offenders who also have strong paranoid and narcissistic traits—in particular, those who cling to the position of the aggrieved “victim,” despite overwhelming evidence that their own actions have placed them in their unpleasant situation. These offenders may become stagnated in their own self-pity, anger, and persecutory ruminations. It is possible that the harsh early childhoods that some of these offenders endured contributed to their impaired ability to trust others as an adult, leaving them with a strongly self-centered, paranoid character.⁵¹ According to developmental theory, a healthier developmental course necessitates the transition away from what Klein⁵² called the “persecutory position,” toward the “depressive position.” The study of violent offenders suggests, according to this theory, that impediments to psychological development cause the offender to become relatively fixed in a persecutory developmental stage, or what Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position.⁵³ In this stage, most of the

⁵⁰ Shakespeare W: *The Tragedy of King Richard III*. The Oxford Shakespeare. Edited by Jowett J. New York: Oxford University Press, Act I, scene iii, pp 46–54

Google Scholar

⁵¹ Kaylor L: Antisocial personality disorder: diagnostic, ethical and treatment issues. *Issues Ment Health Nurs* **20**:247–58, 1999

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Google Scholar

⁵² Klein M: *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946–1963*. New York: The Free Press 1975

Google Scholar

⁵³ Hyatt-Williams A: *Cruelty, Violence and Murder: Understanding the Criminal Mind*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998

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individual's worldview is based on feelings of mistreatment and frustration at what is perceived as intentional harm or purposeful withholding of gratification. Fixation at this stage is associated with the use of more primitive defense mechanisms, such as splitting, externalization, and projective identification. In contrast, the offender who has reached the depressive position has developed the capacity for feelings of concern that he has injured or destroyed some aspect of society (e.g., his fellow human beings). Cognitions associated with the depressive position include regret, empathy with the victim, and interest in making reconciliation with society.

The persecutory cognitions of the offender in the paranoid-schizoid position are experienced as threatening, undeserved attacks on his self. This response is of interest, in that Dietz noted that most men in the United States who have killed 10 or more victims in a single incident have demonstrated "paranoid symptoms of some kind" (Ref.⁵⁴, p 480). Consistent with their feelings of being persecuted, such offenders may also have strong feelings of destructive envy. As regards envy, it is important to note that the offender at the paranoid-schizoid stage is not necessarily envious of the Other's possessions or social status, but the way in which the Other appears to be able to enjoy these things. Thus, the offender's true goal is "to destroy the Other's ability/capacity to enjoy the prized object or status" (Ref.⁵⁵, p 90). For example, in his manifesto, Mr. Cho chides other students in keeping with his perception that they possessed "everything" they ever wanted, such as "Mercedes ... , golden necklaces ... , trust fund[s] ... , vodka and cognac."⁵⁶ Yet in the same manifesto, he reveals his powerful envy, stating: "Oh the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists, being counted as one of you, if only you didn't [expletive] the living [expletive] out of me."⁵⁷ Via projection, such individuals perceive others as persecutory, as well as withholding the goodness and happiness to which they are entitled. Similar cognitions were reported by the pseudocommandos evaluated by Mullen.⁵⁸ They were described as suspicious individuals with strong feelings of persecution and mistreatment, who harbored resentment over past social rejections.

⁵⁴ Dietz P: Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bull N Y Acad Med* **62**:477–91, 1986

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⁵⁵ Zizek S: *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008

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⁵⁶ Alfano S: *Gunman: "Now you have blood on your hands."* *CBS News.com*, April 18, 2007. Available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/04/18/virginiatechshooting/main2697827.shtml>. Accessed December 12, 2009

Google Scholar

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004

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Alternatively, the depressive position allows the individual to confront reality more smoothly. It involves the capacity for feelings of responsibility, guilt, and concern over harm done to others. During long-term incarceration, some offenders may eventually take up pursuits suggestive of attempts to negotiate the depressive phase. For example, a man sentenced to life for murder may become involved in running the prison “lifers group,” or take up creative pursuits such as art, music, or poetry—all examples of reparative activities.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, some offenders may be unable to achieve an attitude embracing personal accountability and reconciliation. In particular, some go on to develop remarkably fixed, chronic feelings of persecution. Clinical observations suggest that some of these offenders ultimately develop an entrenched nihilistic attitude. Nihilism then pervades their cognitions about treatment and life in general. The risk here is that their failure to find meaning in life may result in feelings of hopelessness, self-defeating actions, and suicidality.⁶⁰ Thus, it may be hypothesized that once the offender reaches some individual-specific level of nihilism, he will demonstrate a significantly reduced ability to benefit from efforts designed to extend help and will have little motivation to self-regulate his behavior. These empirical observations of the adverse effects of social rejection and nihilistic beliefs in incarcerated offenders are consistent with research findings in nonincarcerated populations. For example, social rejection has been found in normal subjects to increase feelings of meaninglessness, decrease self-awareness, and impair behavioral self-regulation.^{61, 62}

Social science research has shown that when nihilism and the drive to avoid painful self-awareness become strong enough, there is a significantly increased risk of suicide and self-destructive behavior.⁶³ This theory has been called the “escape theory” of suicide, to denote the suicidal individual’s motivation to escape aversive self-awareness.

⁵⁹ Hyatt-Williams A: *Cruelty, Violence and Murder: Understanding the Criminal Mind*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998

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⁶⁰ Edwards M, Holden R: Coping, meaning in life, and suicidal manifestations: examining gender differences. *J Clin Psychol* **57**:1517–34, 2001

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⁶¹ Baumeister R, DeWall CN, Ciarocco NJ, *et al*: Social exclusion impairs self-regulation. *J Pers Soc Psychol* **88**:589–604, 2005

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⁶² Twenge J, Catanese K, Baumeister R: Social exclusion and the deconstructed state: time perception, meaninglessness, lethargy, lack of emotion, and self-awareness. *J Pers Soc Psychol* **85**:409–23, 2005

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⁶³ Baumeister R: Suicide as escape from self. *Psychol Rev* **97**:90–113, 1990

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According to the escape theory, when the individual is unable to avoid negative affect and painful self-awareness, a process of “cognitive deconstruction” occurs in which he rejects meaning and descends into hopelessness, irrationality, and disinhibition. Suicide then becomes the ultimate step in the effort to escape awareness and its implications about the self. Applying this theory to the psychology of the pseudocommando, the stage of cognitive deconstruction seems to signal a potentially deadly turning point. Having tried and failed to place his painful self-awareness outside himself, he redoubles his efforts to externalize. These efforts merely return to him as even more powerful persecutory attacks from outside. In select individuals, this reaction may culminate in a real-life physical attack directed outward to avoid what is within. For the pseudocommando laboring under a heavy burden of persecutory ideas and negative affect, consciousness of his true predicament is self-torment. Because he is a conscious being, reality will eventually permeate the fault lines of his defenses. Clear contemplation of his predicament is the equivalent of an unending suicide—a painful assault by reality, combined with his own persecutory attacks. His existence has become the progressive self-destruction of a subject given over to a condition of catastrophic fear, rage, and despair.

The Obliterative State of Mind

Shakespeare’s *Richard III* is a classic illustration of a mind committed to revenge and driven by powerful grievance. His state of mind may be regarded as obliterative, in that it functions to spread more grievance, destruction, and ultimately, annihilation.⁶⁴ Such individuals may come to embrace a self-styled image based on low self-esteem or negative self-perceptions that may be tinged with an ominous or threatening undertone. That is, they embrace their dark, negative cognitions and fashion them into a recognizable suit of black armor. Just as Richard III defined himself by his own deformity, so Mr. Cho defined himself by his outcast status—even calling himself the “question mark kid.” Thus, persons driven by envy and destruction tend to see others “as in the light and [choose] to stay in the dark ...” (Ref.⁶⁵, p 702). In the case of Richard III, envy and destructive narcissism led him to the conscious adoption of the role of reprobate:

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,

⁶⁴ Anderson M: The death of a mind: a study of Shakespeare’s Richard III. *J Anal Psychol* **51**:701–16, 2006

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⁶⁵ Ibid.

And hate the idle pleasures of these days.⁶⁶

Toxic levels of “envy and narcissism ... can fracture the personality, hold it hostage and in thrall, by being fuelled by triumph and contempt ...” (Ref.⁶⁷, p 703). The developing pseudocommando must hold fast to his “hatred of anything such as growth, beauty, or humanity which is an advance over a bleak, static interior landscape” (Ref.⁶⁸, p 710). Note, however, that there is still another important psychological motive behind Richard’s decision to “prove a villain.” Specifically, it is his belief that “Nature has done me a grievous wrong Life owes me reparation for this I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. I may do wrong myself, since wrong has been done to me” (Ref.⁶⁹, pp 314–15). It is this feeling of being an exception to the rule, of being entitled to harm others or break societal laws, that fuels the pseudocommando’s oblitative state of mind. Once he has embraced this mindset, he condemns himself to a mental space in which “he cannot envision rescue from this commitment to a killing field externally or internally” (Ref.⁷⁰, p 709). The narcissistic injury, which is utterly intolerable, is “essentially nihilistic: nothing matters, all is despair ... all goodness and substance are obliterated, so that nothingness defines the domain” (Ref.⁷¹, p 710). This is the oblitative mindset—destroy everything, embrace nothingness.

Such an individual needs a mental “sanctuary” from the oppressive, relentless nihilism that assails him. It is only from such a sanctuary that he has hope of achieving greater mental clarity and freedom from persecution, reclaiming the notion of the Other’s potential “goodness,” and relinquishing his pseudoempowering revenge fan-

⁶⁶ Shakespeare W: *The Tragedy of King Richard III*. The Oxford Shakespeare. Edited by Jowett J. New York: Oxford University Press, Act I, scene iii, pp 46–54

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⁶⁷ Anderson M: The death of a mind: a study of Shakespeare’s Richard III. *J Anal Psychol* **51**:701–16, 2006

CrossRef

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Google Scholar

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Freud S: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (vol 14)*. Translated by Strachey J. Toronto: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1981, pp 314–15

Google Scholar

⁷⁰ Anderson M: The death of a mind: a study of Shakespeare’s Richard III. *J Anal Psychol* **51**:701–16, 2006

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Google Scholar

⁷¹ Anderson M: The death of a mind: a study of Shakespeare’s Richard III. *J Anal Psychol* **51**:701–16, 2006

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tasies. Sadly, it is the case that some individuals may never be able to relinquish the Ahab-Richard III state of mind, as all attempts at empathy may be met with suspicion, defensiveness, and contempt. At this point, the individual is unable or unwilling to re-emerge from his “heroic” fantasy of justified, “honorable” revenge. As the pseudocommando comes closer to turning fantasy into reality, he must undergo a process by which he comes to accept that he will be sacrificing his own life. It may be that this obstacle is easier for him to overcome when his catastrophic thinking leads him to believe violent homicide-suicide is his only option, and his oblitative mindset causes him to feel that his self is already dead. The death of his physical body is simply an inevitability of little consequence. These cognitions will eliminate his capacity for undistorted judgment, finding meaning in life, and sublimating aggression. Now he is able to override his survival instinct and reach the point of “willingness to sacrifice one’s body” (Ref.⁷², p 73).

Once the pseudocommando reaches the stage of genuine willingness to sacrifice himself, he becomes a vortex into which all data are taken and reconfigured to substantiate the grounds of the revenge fantasy. At some individualized point, the pseudocommando makes the decision to bring his revenge fantasies into the daylight of reality. He also begins to formulate his final communications. These communications have great meaning to him, as he realizes that they will be the only living testament to his motivations, struggle, and heroic sacrifice. He pulls the words from deep within his shattered psyche and carefully spreads them out for all to see. Like a poker player who lays down his royal flush, he reveals his hate-filled, oblitative hand to the shock and lament of all who bare witness.

Conclusions

Mass murders have occurred since well before the Whitman shooting in 1966. What constitutes a more modern twist on mass murder is the pseudocommando-style shootings, as first described by Dietz⁷³ and more recently by Mullen.⁷⁴ Present day access to powerful automatic firearms, as well as glorification of the phenomenon by the media are two factors making modern mass murders unique.

This article has presented a discussion of the psychology of revenge, focusing on revenge fantasies in pseudocommando mass murderers. These individuals nurture feel-

⁷² Gilligan J: *Preventing Violence*. New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2001
Google Scholar

⁷³ Dietz P: Mass, serial and sensational homicides. *Bull N Y Acad Med* **62**:477–91, 1986
PubMed
Google Scholar

⁷⁴ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004
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ings of persecution, resentment, and destructive envy. When the pseudocommando has reached the limit of his ability to avoid painful self-awareness, his revenge fantasy becomes his last refuge until he achieves a willingness to sacrifice himself. Part II will demonstrate how the final communications of pseudocommandos are rich sources of data regarding their individual motives and psychopathology.

Part II: The Language of Revenge

Abstract

In Part I of this article, research on pseudocommandos was reviewed, and the important role that revenge fantasies play in motivating such persons to commit mass murder-suicide was discussed. Before carrying out their mass shootings, pseudocommandos may communicate some final message to the public or news media. These communications are rich sources of data about their motives and psychopathology. In Part II of this article, forensic psycholinguistic analysis is applied to clarify the primary motivations, detect the presence of mental illness, and discern important individual differences in the final communications of two recent pseudocommandos: Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech) and Jiverly Wong (Binghamton, NY). Although both men committed offenses that qualify them as pseudocommandos, their final communications reveal striking differences in their psychopathology.

What if ...humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak? [Ref.¹, p 61]

Hempel *et al.* were among the first to note that mass murderers with a “warrior mentality” may “convey their central motivation in a psychological abstract, a phrase or sentence yelled with great emotion at the beginning of the mass murder” (Ref.², p 213). To date, the actual communications of pseudocommando mass murderers have received little analysis, even though “the words people use ...can reveal important aspects of their social and psychological worlds” (Ref.³, p 547). A subject’s use of language may also suggest different types of mental illness and may lend clues about his past history, ethnic background, and primary motivations.

In this article, I examine the final communications of two pseudocommando mass murderers in an effort to reveal the themes that emerge and whether such communica-

¹ Zizek S: *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008

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² Hempel A, Meloy J, Richards T: Offender and offense characteristics of a nonrandom sample of mass murderers. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* **27**:213–25, 1999

Abstract/FREE Full Text

Google Scholar

³ Pennebaker J, Mehl M, Niederhoffer K: Psychological aspects of natural language use: our words, our selves. *Annu Rev Psychol* **54**:547–77, 2003

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tions can lead to deeper insights into the psychology and motivations of the offenders. Such analyses begin with the assumption that the offender would not have bothered to write or communicate his “manifesto” unless it had great personal meaning. In the cases that will be examined, both offenders took the time and effort to craft and then deliver their communications to television news media, suggesting that they believed their communications contained important information for others.

If we accept the working hypothesis that these communications are highly meaningful to the pseudocommando, we may examine them for what they reveal about his motives, psychological state, and a wealth of other data. Through careful forensic psycholinguistic analysis, it is possible to discern personality variables, cognitive styles, and the presence of certain types of mental illness.⁴ Analysis may also suggest important information, such as educational level, religious orientation, and cultural background. Psychiatrists are in a unique position to analyze written communications for different forms of mental illness, such as schizophrenia,⁵ depression,⁶ and other types of emotional turmoil. For example, it has been suggested that the excessive use of pronouns is associated with high levels of psychological distress.⁷ The use of metaphor or metonymy may also contain clues about an individual’s history, ethnic background, primary motivations, and level of distress.⁸ Data as seemingly inconsequential as an e-mail address may suggest clues about personality structure.⁹ A psycholinguistic study of threatening persons from the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent

⁴ Smith S, Shuy R: Forensic psycholinguistics: using language analysis for identifying and assessing offenders. *FBI Law Enforcement Bull* **71**:16–21, 2002

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⁵ Stephane M, Pellizzer G, Fletcher CR, *et al*: Empirical evaluation of language disorder in schizophrenia. *J Psychiatry Neurosci* **32**:250–8, 2007

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⁶ Pennebaker JW, Stone LD: *What was she trying to say?—a linguistic analysis of Katie’s Diaries, in Katie’s Diary: Unlocking the Mystery of a Suicide*. Edited by Lester D. New York: Routledge Press, 2003, pp 55–79

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⁷ Henken V: Banality reinvestigated: a computer-based content analysis of suicidal and forced death documents. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior* **6**:36–43, 1976

Google Scholar

⁸ Eynon T: Cognitive linguistics. *Adv Psychiatr Treat* **8**:399–407, 2002

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⁹ Back M, Schmukle S, Egloff B: How extraverted is honey.bunny77@hotmail.de?—inferring personality from e-mail addresses. *J Res Personal* **42**:1116–22, 2008

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Crime (NCAVC) database found that “higher conceptual complexity” and “lower ambivalent hostility/paranoia” were more strongly associated with predatory violence.¹⁰

Before proceeding with the analyses of the final communications of Seung-Hui Cho and Jiverly Wong, a few points related to ethics, objectivity, and limitations are in order. The forensic psychiatrist’s objectivity may be called into question if the expert gives an opinion without first performing a personal examination in cases that require one.¹¹ To be clear, this analysis does not constitute an expert opinion. Rather, it is a linguistic exercise that attempts to gain a deeper understanding of these offenders’ psychology from materials available in the public domain. The psycholinguistic analyses herein should be viewed as working hypotheses. In addition, the analyses are obviously limited by the lack of personal evaluation, as well as other confidential collateral sources.

The Principles of Medical Ethics With Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry, § 7.3 (i.e., the Goldwater Rule) states that “a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general.”¹² The intent of this article is to explore, via public-domain writings, the general psychology and motivations of Mr. Cho and Mr. Wong. I refrain from offering a professional opinion about specific diagnoses; rather, I offer limited and broad hypotheses about their motives and psychopathology.

Seung-Hui Cho

On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Tech, shot to death 33 students and faculty.¹³ He wounded 24 more and then committed suicide by shooting himself. The incident was an unfathomable tragedy for the surviving college students, their families, and the entire country. The Virginia Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted an investigation, finding that Mr. Cho did not significantly raise

¹⁰ Smith S: *From violent words to violent deeds: assessing risk from FBI threatening communication cases, in Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures: A Psychological and Behavioral Analysis*. Edited by Meloy J, Sheridan L, Hoffman J. New York: Oxford Press, 2008, pp 435–55

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¹¹ The American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law: *Ethics Guidelines for the Practice of Forensic Psychiatry*. May, 2005. Available at <http://www.aapl.org/ethics.htm>. Accessed April 30, 2009

Google Scholar

¹² The Principles of Medical Ethics, Revised. Arlington, VA: *American Psychiatric Association*, 2009. Available at <http://www.psych.org/mainmenu/psychiatricpractice/ethics/resourcesstandards/principlesofmedicaethics.aspx>. Accessed April 5, 2010

Google Scholar

¹³ Summary of Key Findings. Mass Shooting at Virginia Tech: *Report of the Review Panel*. August, 2007. Available at <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport-docs/4%20summary%20of%20key%20findings.pdf>. Accessed June 2, 2009

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any concerns until approximately December 2005.¹⁴ At that time, he was perceived as threatening and odd by peers and faculty. He was seen several times by the campus police when other students complained that he had harassed them. On December 13, 2005, campus police told him that his continuing acts of harassment could lead to criminal charges in the future. That same day, Mr. Cho sent an instant message to a roommate stating, “I might as well kill myself or something,” and “everybody just hates me.”¹⁵ This comment ultimately resulted in an evaluation of Mr. Cho by a social work clinician. The evaluation led to an overnight stay in a psychiatric facility. The evaluation noted social anxiety and possible depressive symptoms, but no evidence of psychosis was detected.

The following day, he was evaluated by a psychologist who found him to be mentally ill, but not an imminent danger to himself or others. Several hours later, he was released with an appointment at a counseling center for later that day, December 14, 2005. At that appointment, he denied having any suicidal or homicidal ideas and said that his suicidal statement had been a “joke.” Although he was encouraged to return for follow-up in January, no appointment was scheduled. There were no further incidents reported by the OIG investigation until the shootings on April 16, 2007. It may be theorized that before and after his evaluation he was having violent revenge fantasies. This possibility is deduced primarily from several plays that he wrote for class that contained themes of gratuitous violence and revenge.¹⁶ The OIG investigation reported that after Mr. Cho’s psychiatric evaluation, his peers described him as isolative and rarely making eye contact. He would usually not respond if spoken to or would simply give one-word answers. His peers reported not observing any evidence of confused thinking, odd behavior, or agitation. He appeared mildly sad, yet he was known for not showing much emotion. Most of his peers said they never really knew him.

On the day of the shootings, NBC received a package containing Mr. Cho’s 1,800-word video manifesto on CD, plus 43 photographs. To say that Mr. Cho had prepared for the shootings would be an understatement. The preparatory stage appeared to reach its zenith during the crafting of his manifesto. The process involved his taking photographs of himself dressed in several warrior outfits, while striking threatening

¹⁴ Stewart J: *Investigation of April 16, 2007 Critical Incident at Virginia Tech*. Richmond, VA: Office of the Inspector General For Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services. Report 140-07. Available at <http://www.oig.virginia.gov/documents/VATechRpt140-07.pdf>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

¹⁵ Mr. Cho’s Carilion Health System discharge summary, prepared by Jasdeep Miglani, MD. December 14, 2005. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/documents/miller-records081909.pdf>. Accessed April 5, 2010

Google Scholar

¹⁶ Cho S: *Richard McBeef*. Available at <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/years/2007/0417071vtech1.html>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

poses. Eleven of the photographs were of Mr. Cho aiming handguns at the camera.¹⁷ In one dramatic photograph, he is holding a handgun in each hand with his arms spread wide. He is wearing a military-style vest for carrying ammunition, and a large knife is strapped to his belt as he stares menacingly into the camera. In two other photographs, Mr. Cho appears to be mimicking suicidal behavior. In one, he points a handgun at his right temple. In the other, he holds a large hunting knife to the left side of his neck.

Mr. Cho's Communications

The following is an analysis of select revelatory excerpts, as space limitations do not permit commentary on the manifesto in its entirety.^{18,19} Let us begin by considering his admonishment: You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today.²⁰

The phrase “chances and ways” suggests that until the day of the shootings, he viewed himself as keeping a “running tally” of mistreatments and “failed opportunities” for others to set things right. The strong element of externalization of blame is self-evident and continues with the sentence: But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off.²¹

He does not assign just some blame to his victims, but every bit of it. Self-righteous rage is thus justified by projecting all blame “until it appeared to reside only in the other” (Ref.²², p 1234). He portrays himself as blame free and even benevolent, having given innumerable “chances” to his victims. The blood of the victims, he chastises, will

¹⁷ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

¹⁸ Alfano S: *Gunman: “Now You Have Blood On Your Hands.” CBS News.com*, April 18, 2007. Available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/04/18/virginiatechshooting/main2697827.shtml>. Accessed December 23, 2009

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¹⁹ CNN.com: *Killer's manifesto: “You forced me into a corner.”* April 18, 2007. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/04/18/vtech.shooting/index.html>. Accessed December 23, 2009

Google Scholar

²⁰ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

²¹ Ibid.

²² Horowitz M: Self-righteous rage and the attribution of blame. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* **38**:1233–8, 1981

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torment “them” like Lady Macbeth. This reveals a fantasy that the devalued others will remain tormented by a traumatic guilt that can “never” be alleviated. The severity of Mr. Cho’s pathological self-concept is suggested by the fact that portraying himself as blame-free was not enough. His ego was so impoverished that it required more—that he be a “heroic” sacrifice to “save” the weak. Thus, he becomes not merely “all good,” but actually God-like: Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people.... If not for me, for my children and my brothers and sisters that you (expletive). I did it for them.²³

The expression “my children” is interesting in that Mr. Cho was not known to have fathered any children. His statement may suggest that he is further extending the Christ metaphor in a grandiose way. (This assumes that he did not delusionally believe he had fathered children, and there is no available evidence to suggest that he had such a delusion.) He ominously acknowledges wanting to “inspire” others, a phenomenon noted by Mullen,²⁴ who found that pseudocommandos who were captured alive referred to other infamous cases of mass murder.

Strikingly, Mr. Cho realized he had other options. Unfortunately, he had become too deeply invested in his revenge romance: I didn’t have to do it. I could have left. I could have fled. But now I am no longer running.²⁵

That he states with finality that he is “no longer running” may be viewed as evidence that he had not only reached the oblitative state of mind, but also that he was no longer able to defend against the aversive self-awareness he had been running from for so long. His actions had already brought him close to an extended involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. His behavior after his mental health evaluation suggests he withdrew profoundly, as he was now aware of the consequences should he act out again. Further, one alternative to rage over unmet needs is to become remote.²⁶ While the needs of his ego were still present, an isolative withdrawal would give him a dulled or

²³ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

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²⁴ Mullen P: The autogenic (self-generated) massacre. *Behav Sci Law* **22**:311–23, 2004

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²⁵ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

²⁶ Horowitz M: Self-righteous rage and the attribution of blame. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* **38**:1233–8, 1981

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deadened quality.²⁷ Thus, after his 2005 evaluation and release, he was alone with his thoughts, which probably consisted of rumination over the “hundred billion” injustices he perceived himself as having endured. For refuge, he had the pleasurable fantasy of becoming a heroic avenger of the weak and the defenseless. In contrast to his fantasy of being an all-good hero, others are portrayed as having committed heinous, sadistic acts against him: You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy’s life you were extinguishing.²⁸

The metaphors used here are extremely powerful and portray others as having targeted his innermost self for cruel and traumatic persecution, suggesting the strength of his persecutory cognitions. His use of the term “pathetic boy” signifies his own threadbare self-esteem. It was not necessary for him to include this descriptor, yet he does. Indeed, this is one of the only points in his manifesto by which he (perhaps inadvertently) reveals to others his own fragility and fears about his own self-worth.²⁹ For the most part, his communications consist of scathing, acerbic attacks designed to denigrate the “others” and maximize their guilt. He then assigns motive to their persecution—their own “amusement” and sheer enjoyment of exercising power over him: Do you know what it feels like to dig your own grave? ...Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and be impaled upon a cross and left to bleed to death for your amusement? You have never felt a single ounce of pain your whole life. And you want to inject as much misery in our lives ...just because you can.³⁰

These accusations are interesting because they involve the concept of death, specifically his death, and suggest that the idea of death was present in Mr. Cho’s ruminations. Going a step further, these communications may suggest that he felt, affectively, existentially, or even delusionally, that he was already dead. The comparison to the heroic Christ figure is again present in his remarks about being impaled on a cross, as well as an extreme degree of splitting in his assertion that his victims had never

²⁷ Horowitz M: Self-righteous rage and the attribution of blame. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* **38**:1233–8, 1981

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²⁸ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

²⁹ DePue R: A Theoretical Profile of Seung Hui Cho: From the Perspective of a Forensic Behavioral Scientist, Appendix N. *Mass Shooting at Virginia Tech: Report of the Review Panel*. August, 2007. Available at <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport.cfm>. Accessed June 2, 2009

Google Scholar

³⁰ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

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felt “a single ounce” of pain. Note, too, the phrase “our lives,” which is consistent with his earlier statements that he believes he is not alone in his victimhood. Yet there is no evidence, in reality, that he was ever able to connect with a group of disaffected, unhappy individuals. Thus, he creates this group from whole cloth, as it bolsters his hero fantasy, and provides comfort via the notions that there is strength in numbers and he does not suffer alone.

The following statements give the best insight into Mr. Cho’s paranoid-schizoid dynamics: You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn’t enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything...³¹

He bitterly declares that the “best” things in life were in the possession of the persecutory others. “They” had access to all of life’s goodness and pleasure. He also states this with considerable derision, due to his perception that they had access to an endless amount of goodness (hedonistic fulfillments), and yet it was still not “enough” for them. But his attempt to disparage the others’ access to goodness is easily seen as a diaphanous veil covering his overwhelming feelings of envy, as is evidenced clearly by his later statement: Oh the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists, being counted as one of you, if only you didn’t [expletive] the living [expletive] out of me.³²

In this rueful statement, he reveals his true desire: to be accepted socially, which also has taken on the meaning to him of gaining access to “hedonistic” levels of enjoyment in life. But the very group of others who seemed to possess such goodness was the group subjecting him to extreme persecution. Returning to Kleinian theory, at the paranoid-schizoid developmental stage, the subject may often take the view that if the wished-for goodness is not forthcoming, it must necessarily be the case that it is being purposely withheld.³³ For why else would they not be generous with their goodness, unless the deprivation was a purposeful act of withholding? This deprivation is viewed as providing the other with sadistic gratification.

Clinical experience and Kleinian theory suggest that the development of feelings of gratitude and some desire to repair the damage done to the other is the route out of the destructive path of envy.³⁴ Mr. Cho may have attempted to engage in some reparative (i.e., creative) activities via writing plays.³⁵ However, these writings were

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Klein M: *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works*, 1946–1963. New York: The Free Press, 1975
Google Scholar

³⁴ Hyatt-Williams A: *Cruelty, Violence and Murder: Understanding the Criminal Mind*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998
Google Scholar

³⁵ Cho S: *Richard McBeef*. Available at <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/years/2007/0417071vtech1.html>. Accessed July 23, 2009
Google Scholar

saturated with destructive, violent themes, suggesting that this route may have been closed off to him at the time. Indeed, he puts it most plainly that he has reached a point of no return, the oblitative state of mind: “When the time came, I did it. I had to.” Finally, his time spent in violent fantasy and chronic embitterment had the effect of intensifying his revenge desires: All the [expletive] you’ve given me. Right back at you with hollow points.³⁶

The hollow-point is a special variety of bullet that is “more devastating, producing a larger and more irregular wound track” than most other bullet types (Ref.³⁷, p 371). Thus, Mr. Cho is indicating that he is responding with overkill: an eye for an eye has been transmuted into many lives lost as compensation for a wounded ego.

Jiverly Wong

Jiverly Wong was a 41-year-old Vietnamese immigrant living in New York State. On April 3, 2009, he burst into the American Civic Association in Binghamton, New York, carrying two handguns and wearing body armor. Before entering, he used his father’s car to block off the back door, the building’s only other exit. In the very place where he had been taking English classes, he proceeded to kill 13 people before shooting himself. He was equipped with “large amounts of ammunition, and he had held permits since approximately 1996 for the two guns he used (Zikuski J, Binghamton Police Chief, personal communication, April 4, 2009). Local law enforcement investigation quickly discovered that the mass murder was not at all surprising to those who knew Mr. Wong (Zikuski J).

Mr. Wong had immigrated to New York with his family in 1990. He was the second of four children in an ethnically Chinese family that had lived in Vietnam. His father reported that, not long after they moved to the United States, his son told him “someone was trying to kill him.”³⁸ Mr. Wong was approximately 22 years old at the time and complained to his father of what may have been visual hallucinations or paranoid delusions of someone trying to harm him. He willingly went to the hospital with his father, where he was evaluated and released after a short period without treatment or

³⁶ MSNBC.com: *What we know: the latest details on the Virginia Tech massacre investigation*. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080113013401/http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>. Accessed July 23, 2009

Google Scholar

³⁷ Spitz W: *Injury by gunfire, in Spitz and Fisher’s Medicolegal Investigation of Death: Guidelines for the Application of Pathology to Crime Investigation (ed 3)*. Edited by Spitz W. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1993, pp 607–746

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³⁸ Chen P: *Jiverly Wong’s father: what prompted mass killing in Binghamton remains a mystery*. The Post Standard, April 13, 2009. Available at http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/04/jiverly_wongs_father_our_son_w.html. Accessed April 5, 2010

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follow-up. Retrospectively, Mr. Wong's father wondered if his son's lack of treatment may have been due to a communication barrier, as both he and his son spoke little English. Mr. Wong became an American citizen in 1995, but left the country shortly afterward. He returned in 1999 to California where he was married and divorced. He was in poor contact with his family during his 15 years in California, refusing to share his mailing address with them.

After losing his job as a truck driver in California, Mr. Wong moved back to New York to live with his parents in 2007. His parents noticed significant changes in him; he did not care to have friends and barely spoke to anyone.³⁹ Other changes seemed more peculiar. Even in the hot New York summer, he never wore short sleeves. He always emerged from the bathroom after a shower fully dressed in long sleeves and long pants. Next, were several incidents of aggression directed toward his family that seemed out of character. In 2008, Mr. Wong slapped his younger sister across the face during an argument and raised his voice inappropriately to his father in a relatively minor household dispute.

After being laid off from his job at a vacuum cleaner plant in November 2008, Mr. Wong began attending classes at the American Civic Association to improve his English. He was a gun enthusiast who spent his weekends target shooting.⁴⁰ Law enforcement would later discover that he fired an unusually high number of rounds at the range (Zikuski J). The post-tragedy investigation would also uncover that Mr. Wong exercised at a local gym, where he was described as performing only one exercise, a hand- and grip-strengthening exercise (Zikuski J). A coworker at the vacuum cleaner plant reported that Mr. Wong sometimes joked about shooting politicians (Zikuski J). People in his local community believed he may have been upset about not being able to obtain work. There were also unverified reports that he may have had a criminal record dating back to 1999, which involved planning a bank robbery and using cocaine (Zikuski J). In the two weeks leading up to the tragedy, his father noted that he stopped eating dinner, stopped watching television, and became even more isolated.⁴¹ At approximately that time he composed the letter that he sent to *News 10 Now*, at a Syracuse television station.

Mr. Wong's Communications

According to survivors who were present at the time of the shooting, Mr. Wong did not speak before opening fire (Zikuski J). Several days after the tragedy, an envelope

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rivera R: *Before killings, hints of plans and grievance*. The New York Times, April 5, 2009
Google Scholar

⁴¹ Chen P: *Jiverly Wong's father: what prompted mass killing in Binghamton remains a mystery*. The Post Standard, April 13, 2009. Available at http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/04/jiverly_wongs_father_our_son_w.html. Accessed April 5, 2010
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was received by *News 10 Now*. The package contained a two-page handwritten letter, a gun permit, his driver's license, and photographs of Mr. Wong smiling while holding handguns. Although the letter was dated March 18, 2009, it was postmarked April 3, 2009, suggesting that he had been planning the shootings for a significant period. The letter was written in all capital letters and contained numerous errors in spelling and grammar. An analysis and commentary on selected excerpts follows. I am Jiverly Wong shooting the people.⁴²

This is the opening sentence of Mr. Wong's letter, and its purpose is clear: to give him the credit and call attention to a very important message that he wants disseminated. Throughout the letter, there are several sentences that seem somewhat perplexing, in that their tone is incongruous with the overall theme and purpose of the letter. Consider the fact that he is writing a letter explaining why he will be killing people and how he believes he has been severely persecuted, yet at the same time he makes statements such as the following: The first I want to say sorry I know a little English I hope you understand all of this.... Please continue second page thank you.... And you have a nice day.⁴³

These statements are strikingly courteous and seem entirely incongruous with the emotional tone of the rest of the letter. There are several possibilities that may explain his tone, all of which remain speculative. The courteousness may represent a cultural phenomenon manifesting in his limited English-writing skills. The incongruousness or inappropriateness may also suggest the inappropriate affect or emotions sometimes seen in major psychotic disorders. A final possibility is simple sarcasm and mockery, as when Atlanta mass murderer Mark Barton said in his final communication, "I hope this doesn't ruin your trading day."⁴⁴ However, given the sincere, straightforward tone observed in the rest of his letter, the possibility of sarcasm seems less likely for all but the last statement, which appears at the very end of the letter.

Mr. Wong's letter gets right to the point from the beginning: Of course you need to know why I shooting? Because undercover cop gave me a lot of ass during eighteen years.⁴⁵

He bluntly answers the question he knew would be on everyone's mind: Why? His answer: relentless persecution. He believes that he has been severely harassed and abused for almost two decades. Throughout his letter, he refers to his persecutor as an

⁴² Jiverly Wong's Letter to News 10. Available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_documents/wongletter.pdf. Accessed April 5, 2010

Google Scholar

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cohen A, Fulton G, Monroe S, *et al*: *A Portrait of the Killer*. Time.com. August 9, 1999. Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,991676,00.html?promoid=googlep>. Accessed December 22, 2009

Google Scholar

⁴⁵ Jiverly Wong's Letter to News 10. Available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_documents/wongletter.pdf. Accessed April 5, 2010

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“undercover” cop. In real life, undercover officers are difficult to identify. They could be anybody, anywhere, at any time, as it is their purpose to remain undetected by the individual they are pursuing. Of special import is that the period of 18 years places the beginning of his perceived persecution at about the same time he first told his father he feared for his life and appeared to experience psychotic symptoms. The early 20s is commonly observed to be the age at which major psychotic disorders begin and typically is the time associated with a first break in schizophrenia.⁴⁶ As the letter continues, it becomes more apparent that Mr. Wong was having severe persecutory delusions: Let talk about when I live in California.... Cop used 24 hours the technique of ultramodern and camera for burn the chemical in my house. For switch the channel Ti Vi. For adjust the fan. For made me unbreathable. For made me vomit. For connect the music into my ear.⁴⁷

Mr. Wong appears to describe classic persecutory delusions of technology. Delusions of a technical content (e.g., “ultramodern camera,” control of electrical devices in the house) have been reported to occur with greater frequency in men than in women.⁴⁸ The possibility of olfactory hallucinations may be considered due to his complaint of burning chemicals in his house. The possibility of auditory hallucinations is raised by his complaint that his persecutor caused him to hear music in his ear. While such hallucinations are typically seen in psychotic disorders, the phenomenon of olfactory hallucinations and auditory hallucinations of music may sometimes be seen in certain seizure disorders, such as temporal lobe epilepsy.⁴⁹⁵⁰ It is difficult to say whether his perceptions of his fan and television represented hallucinations or paranoid delusions of reference. His statement about being “unbreathable” is curious and raises the question of anxiety and panic-like symptoms, possibly associated with his delusions of being poisoned by “burning chemicals.” Regardless, it is clear that he felt persecuted and under “24-hour” surveillance. The same delusional theme, persecution by an “undercover cop,” persists throughout the letter: [When I lived in NY] ...it terrible.... Cop wait until

⁴⁶ Minzenberg M, Yoon J, Carter C: *Schizophrenia*, in *The American Psychiatric Publishing Textbook of Psychiatry (ed 5)*. Edited by Hales R, Yudofsky S, Gabbard G. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2008, pp 407–56

Google Scholar

⁴⁷ Jiverly Wong’s Letter to News 10. Available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_documents/wongletter.pdf. Accessed April 5, 2010

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⁴⁸ Kraus A: Phenomenology of the technical delusion in schizophrenia. *J Phenomenol Psychol* **25**:51–69, 1994

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⁴⁹ Taber K, Hurley R: *Neuroanatomy for the psychiatrist*, in *The American Psychiatric Publishing Textbook of Psychiatry (ed 5)*. Edited by Hales R, Yudofsky S, Gabbard G. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2008, pp 157–89

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⁵⁰ Adams R, Victor M: *Neurologic disorders caused by lesions in particular parts of the cerebrum*, in *Principles of Neurology (ed 5)*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993, pp 378–410

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midnight when I off the light and went to the bed. Cop unlock my door and came in take a sit in my room...on the thirteen time had three time touch me when I sleeping.⁵¹

This passage suggests that his persecutory delusions took on a more threatening and invasive nature. His persecutor is no longer harassing him from a distance, but has actually invaded his personal space. This change may represent a more severe decompensation of ego functioning: his persecutor has metaphorically broken through his fragmented defenses. Because of his deficient English, it is difficult to discern conclusively whether he meant to say that the cop entered his room and sat down, or the cop defecated (“take a sit”) in his room. The former implies a menacing and brazen invasion of privacy, while the latter adds an element of outrageous degradation. Also note that his persecutor has progressed to the level of actually touching him. These more invasive, threatening delusions suggest a worsening of his illness, and evidence of this worsening continues over time. For example, the following statement: “One time [cop] stolen 20 dollar in my wallet. One time used electric gun shoot at the behind my neck,”⁵² indicates a continuation of his invasive, highly persecutory delusions.

It also appears as though Mr. Wong believed that there was a collaboration or conspiracy between the “undercover cop” in California, and the one in New York: “Many time from 1990 to 1997.... Spread a rumor nasty like the California Cop.”⁵³ He made other statements suggesting that he believed these rumors caused him terrible misfortune, such as losing his job and being treated poorly by others. Feelings of cultural marginalization associated with paranoid delusion also appear to have played a role. For example, he states, “...one time Cop leave a massage in my voice mail and said [come back your country].”⁵⁴ Finally, we see that he has reached the obliterative state of mind, as evidenced by the last lines of his letter: ...I cannot accepted my poor life. Before I cut my poor life I must oneself get a judge job for make an impartial with undercover Cop by at least two people with me go to return to the dust of Earth. Already impartial now.... Cop bring about this shooting. Cop must [be held] responsible.⁵⁵

Like Mr. Cho, he reveals briefly his own decimated self-esteem (his “poor life”). However, unlike Mr. Cho, he does not take the route of turning his plans and actions into a heroic revenge fantasy. Rather, he simply puts forth his nihilistic state of mind and desire for revenge. After enduring more persecution than he can tolerate, he is unable to envision that his life will ever be different. He believes that his life is a “poor” one, suggesting aversive self-awareness, and the only escape he is able to conceive of is suicide. However, he has been horribly mistreated, and his suicide alone would leave an

⁵¹ Jiverly Wong’s Letter to News 10. Available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_documents/wongletter.pdf. Accessed April 5, 2010

Google Scholar

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

unjust lack of “balance” (“impartial,” i.e., fair or unbiased).⁵⁶ Thus, a vengeful judgment must be passed. Or in his words, his persecutor “must” be held “responsible.” But his persecutor(s) are “undercover,” and cannot be identified. A substitute group must be chosen. He leaves us with a message that might be reformulated as: “I want others to hurt like I do—maybe then my persecutors will be held responsible.”

There are two unanswered questions in the case of Mr. Wong: why did he choose the American Civic Center, and why did he kill 13 people when he gives the more modest number of “at least two” in his letter? His choice of the American Civic Center may be the missing expression of envy, one that he simply failed to allude to in his letter. Immigrants learning English at the Civic Center may have represented his lost hope for success in the United States. His envy of others who were achieving what he had so desperately wanted may have been a driving force in his choice to “destroy” those he saw as potentially enjoying this goal. Finally, it may be that because of his language skills and cultural background, his letter did not communicate the full extent of the rage and hostility he had been harboring. Thus, while he writes about killing “at least two” people, he brought with him more than enough ammunition to kill that many and more (Zikuski J). The police investigation found that Mr. Wong had been able to fire an unusually high number of rounds in a very brief time and with startling accuracy (Zikuski J). It may be speculated that he could have killed in excess of 13, but chose to shoot himself when he heard approaching police sirens. It is also possible that from the time he authored his letter until the time he performed the shootings (two weeks later), his violent revenge fantasy was intensified by isolative rumination. Thus, “at least two” began to grow in number, and the phrasing “at least” seems to foreshadow this outcome.

Discussion

Both Mr. Cho and Mr. Wong committed mass murder as defined by the present-day Bureau of Justice definition. Both killed four or more victims at one location, within one event. Both men followed the pattern of the pseudocommando, in that they were heavily armed, wore warrior gear, committed the act during the day, planned for the act, and expected to be killed. The final communications of both men also revealed that they harbored strong emotions of anger, feelings of persecution, and severely damaged self-esteem. Both willingly plunged into death and destruction in pursuit of revenge. Both had reached the obliterative mindset in which nothing matters, and violent annihilation must be the final outcome.

It is in analyzing their final communications that the striking differences between the two are revealed. Mr. Wong’s final letter strongly suggests that he had a major

⁵⁶ Roget’s II: *The New Thesaurus, Expanded Edition*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988

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psychotic disorder. Even more weight is added to this possibility by his father's report of psychotic symptoms beginning in Mr. Wong's early 20s. Although he was resentful about the status of his "poor life," he attributed all his misfortunes to a bizarre, delusional persecution by an "undercover cop." In effect, his invisible persecutor(s) (his psychotic illness) had destroyed his chances of assimilating and working successfully in the country to which he had immigrated. For approximately two decades, Mr. Wong had felt that he had been subjected to cruel and humiliating harassment. Upon reaching the obliterative state of mind, he reasoned that he would no longer be the passive recipient of persecution. Instead, he would assume the role of persecutor and punishing "judge." In his case, we see much less overt envy expressed in his final communication. Rather, his letter dwells mainly on his persecutory delusions and his plan to commit homicide-suicide because of his aversive self-awareness (i.e., his "unacceptable," "poor life").

In contrast, Mr. Cho's final communications afford a clear view into the psychodynamics of envy and social exclusion. He goes so far as to acknowledge his desire to be part of the "hedonistic" crowd that he imagined had unlimited access to life's pleasures. His manifesto does not contain any overtly delusional thoughts, although one may argue that his feelings of persecution may have reached delusional or near delusional levels. However, with Mr. Cho, there is no evidence of bizarre or technological delusions, and his mental health evaluations of 2005 did not find any psychotic symptoms. Rather, his letter is rife with externalization, splitting, and rage flowing from his feelings of social exclusion. His letter also contains more direct and overt expression of vitriolic anger than does Mr. Wong's letter. But perhaps the biggest difference is Mr. Cho's grandiose view of his act as a "heroic sacrifice." He stresses that his own death will not be in vain, as he is sacrificing himself to "save" the "weak and the defenseless." This theme hints at the way he saw himself, as a "pathetic boy" whose life (and self-esteem) had been "extinguished" by his feelings of social exclusion.

A final contrast between the two is obvious in the photographs that they sent to the media. Whereas the photographs sent by Mr. Wong consisted mainly of him sitting down and holding a gun pointed upward, Mr. Cho's were more numerous and clearly posed for dramatic impact. In sum, Mr. Cho's photos suggest substantially more drama and grandiosity, as well as suicidal cognitions. These data, taken together with the writings, suggest that Mr. Wong's primary pathology may have been a major psychotic disorder (along with a possible depressive disorder), whereas Mr. Cho's primary psychopathology may have been characterological (along with depressive and anxiety spectrum disorders). I do not mean to exclude the possibility that Mr. Cho had begun to have a thought disorder; however, the evidence for such a disorder is far less striking than for Mr. Wong.

Prevention

The unpleasant truth is that such events are extremely hard to prevent.⁵⁷ Recommendations may represent hopeful or idealistic goals, while the reality is that such events may occur without obvious opportunities for deterrence. Retrospectively, one may sometimes discover windows of opportunity that if taken advantage of, could have diverted the course of events leading up to the tragedy. Family members or social contacts can take steps to have the potential pseudocommando evaluated and treated, or if appropriate, involuntarily treated. Employees or coworkers can notify authorities or supervisors once they become reasonably concerned. Third parties can have direct or indirect pre-offense knowledge of the perpetrator's intentions, threats, or troubling behavior. Thus, perhaps one hope of prevention ultimately falls to third parties who possess knowledge about the individual's behavior.⁵⁸ We live in a society that places a high value on privacy, individual liberty, and safety. These priorities may be difficult to balance at times, yet in the case of an individual who raises the concern of family, friends, or coworkers, it seems that the privacy end of the equation must remain flexible, albeit in a carefully reasoned way.

Other preventive factors may include the media, legislation, and sensitivity to acculturation. The media, it may be argued, has a duty to report such incidents in a way that does not grant the perpetrator the power of achieving his goal of sensationalized infamy, which may in turn influence others. Thus, it may be helpful for the media to consider a formalized set of reporting guidelines. For example, it has been suggested that the news media should avoid glorifying the perpetrator and not disclose his methods or the number of victims killed.⁵⁹ Instead, the media should emphasize victim and community recovery efforts and deflect attention from the perpetrator.

Countries with less stringent gun control laws have been observed to have a higher risk of mass murder than countries with stricter laws.⁶⁰ One Australian observational study compared mass murders before and after 1996, the year of a widely publicized

⁵⁷ Saleva O, Putkonen H, Kiviruusu O, *et al*: Homicide-suicide: an event hard to prevent and separate from homicide or suicide. *Forensic Sci Int* **166**:204–8, 2007

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⁵⁸ Aitken L, Oosthuizen P, Emsley R, *et al*: Mass murders: implications for mental health professionals. *Int J Psychiatry Med* **38**:261–9, 2008

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⁵⁹ Preti A: School shooting as a culturally enforced way of expressing suicidal hostile intentions. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* **36**:544–50, 2008

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⁶⁰ Lee J, Lee T, Ng B: Reflections on a mass homicide. *Ann Acad Med* **36**:444–7, 2007

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mass murder in Tasmania.⁶¹ Australia quickly enacted gun law reforms that included removing semiautomatic, pump-action shotguns and rifles from civilian possession. In the 18 years before the gun laws, the Australian authors reported 13 mass shootings. In the 10.5 years after the gun law reforms, there were none.

Finally, cultural differences must be taken into consideration, especially when there is the potential for an immigrant to develop strong feelings of social exclusion. In vulnerable individuals, intense “acculturative stress” may result in strong feelings of “marginalization” (Ref.⁶², p 737). In transcultural psychiatry, the concept of marginalization is not dissimilar from the psychological construct of social exclusion. That is, there is the potential for the marginalized individual to develop feelings of rejection, alienation, and, in some instances, to form a hostile, negative identity. Improving mental health access in immigrant communities to clinicians with competence in transcultural psychiatry may serve a preventive role in select cases. Other steps may involve identifying communities in which it is more difficult to access adequate mental health services and improving nationwide research efforts that are focused on identifying and preventing such tragedies.

Conclusions

Before carrying out mass shootings, pseudocommandos may make special efforts to communicate final messages to the public or news media. Such communications are rich sources of data about the motives and psychology of the pseudocommando. The field of forensic psycholinguistics may be applied in such cases to discern primary motivations, the presence of mental illness, and important individual nuances. Analysis of Mr. Cho’s and Mr. Wong’s final communications revealed important similarities and differences. It is hoped that careful analysis of final communications will ultimately lead to preventive measures through a better understanding of the pseudocommando’s motivations and psychology.

⁶¹ Chapman S, Alpers P, Agho K, *et al*: Australia’s 1996 gun law reforms: faster falls in firearm deaths, firearm suicides, and a decade without mass shootings. *Injury Prev* **12**:365–72, 2006

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⁶² Kohn R, Wintrob R, Alarcon R: *Transcultural psychiatry, in Kaplan and Sadock’s Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry (ed 9)*. Edited by Sadock B, Sadock V, Ruiz P. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2009, pp 734–53

Google Scholar

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his sincere appreciation for the assistance, patience, and compassion of Joseph Zikuski (Binghamton Chief of Police) and Gerald Mollen (Binghamton District Attorney).

- Disclosures of financial or other conflicts of interest: None.
- American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law

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March 2010

Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, Vol. 38, Issue 1 & 2,
March & June 2010, pages 87–94 & 263–272. Part 1 & 2:

[<jaapl.org/content/38/1/87>](http://jaapl.org/content/38/1/87) & [<jaapl.org/content/38/2/263>](http://jaapl.org/content/38/2/263)

PubMed: 20305080 & 20542949

Print ISSN: 1093–6793 & 1093–6793

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