



The School Shootings in Connecticut December 17, 2012

Once again the nation is horrified by an act of senseless mass violence. Since the Columbine disaster, we have had the Virginia Tech campus murders, the attack on Congresswoman Giffords, the Aurora movie theater massacre, the Oregon mall rampage, and numerous others. As psychologists and researchers of aggressive and violent behavior, we are horrified like everyone else, but we also feel a sense of responsibility to try to shed some light on how this could happen. Unfortunately, our science still has a long way to go to understand the psychology of violence completely, and in this case the information on the shooter is very sparse. Still we can make some comments about which we are confident.

Violent behavior is always a product of predisposing characteristics of the individual killer interacting with the killer's learning experiences and with what has happened to the killer very recently (the situation). To most people, the perpetrators of these recent shootings, including the Connecticut school shootings, look somewhat unbalanced or weird. The few who have survived also seem to act psychologically disturbed. Some have histories of psychological treatment. We hear rumors that the shooter is a loner, or unpopular and teased or bullied by peers, or in the Connecticut case suffering from Asperger's Disorder. However, the world is full of "weird" looking and "weird" acting people who never act violently. Most people who are mentally ill or treated by a psychologist or psychiatrist never act violently, and the rate of violence among people with psychiatric disorders is only slightly higher than the rate among the general population (and this is the case only for certain disorders and not others). Most murders are committed by people with a previous history of violence who are filled with such blinding rage that they lose self-control and act in a manic rage. However, a subset of lethal violent acts is committed by people who experience almost no emotion and don't get angry. Such callous and unemotional people just don't feel anything including any empathy. In the extreme we call such people psychopaths. However, again, many people experience intense rage and don't kill, and many people are not empathic and feel little emotions but also never kill. Still, it is clear that for various reasons, many individuals with these kinds of psychological abnormalities do not receive any psychological treatment, and over time without treatment, as situational pressures on the person mount, the risk of violent outbursts increases. The fact is that psychology and psychiatry are not very accurate at predicting 'dangerousness,' especially in a specific individual. If we wait to provide treatment until the danger is clear, it may be too late. If we intervene at the slightest hint of danger, we may be trampling on individuals' rights.

Nevertheless, there are a few things about the string of mass killings that are notable and suggest some possible actions. First, all these massacres involve guns. Why? In principle a perpetrator could go from classroom to classroom stabbing every child with a knife. In fact, someone just tried this in China, but they did not succeed in killing any child. Obviously, guns have some practical advantages for the killer. Guns, and particularly semi-automatic or automatic guns, make killing quicker and more efficient. As psychologists, however, we think it is equally important that guns provide distance between the perpetrator and the victim. Just as it is easier to act aggressively when you are hidden inside a car, it is easier to commit a violent act on innocent individuals from a distance. It is easier to avoid experiencing any empathy and to be psychologically remote from a victim when one is physically remote.

Does a perpetrator think it through in this way? Undoubtedly not. As with many behaviors, they more likely simply 'feel' like doing it this way. So what primes the idea of using guns? One thing we do know is the Connecticut shooter grew up in a family culture of gun use. Of course, many youth grow up as hunters and never use guns for bad purposes. It is unclear if the Connecticut shooter ever went hunting or simply shot at targets for fun. Relatedly, in most recent shootings, including the Connecticut murders, the perpetrator seems to have dressed in some kind of costume or uniform. Why?

One way to think about these things that makes some scientific sense is that the perpetrator was following a script for doing these kinds of things. The script is not the motivating force behind the behavior, but we know that social scripts for behavior can take over and gain a life of their own. How do you commit a horrible act of violence against society? The models in the mass media are numerous. Put on an appropriate uniform (be it a trench coat, a costume from a movie, or a military uniform) that is associated with shooting. This allows the perpetrator to identify more closely with other remembered shooters and enhances the perpetrator's 'deindividuation' which in turn lowers his sense of personal responsibility. Then gather up a bunch of guns of the kinds people use when they do these things; go to a place where there are a lot of people gathered; kill as many as possible; then kill yourself. For many people carrying out such a script would be impossible because of the personal beliefs it would violate and the negative emotions that even thinking about it would produce. But for some people who don't experience negative emotions or who see such behaviors as somewhat normative, or for whom performing such an act might be perceived as achieving a sense of accomplishment and leaving their mark on the world, it is not impossible.

How do the damaged people who become mass shooters acquire such scripts and beliefs? That is pretty clear to every developmental psychologist. Youth first acquire most social scripts by imitating what they see others doing. Imitation is the great teacher of social behavior. Punishments and reinforcements change youths' use of various scripts, but imitation is the powerful force that first gives the ideas of most social scripts to youth. They imitate what they have seen time and again among their peers, in their family, on the news or in the mass media. We don't know if the Connecticut shooter was fond of violent movies and TV or played violent video games. But no youth in America can grow

up today without repeated exposures to fictional video stories and real news video stories similar to what happened in Connecticut.

For most youth the behavioral scripts suggested by these awful events are rejected. However, the reason why so many of these shootings follow a common script is because they are not rejected but rather adapted by some individuals who are psychologically damaged. Unfortunately, this means that we are going to see this script carried out again before too long. Efforts to reduce the likelihood of these events must address the availability of guns and stepping up long-term and coordinated school-based and community-based mental health services. But equally importantly we must strive to find ways, without trampling on the right of free artistic expression, to reduce youth exposure to violence in life and in the mass media. Violence is a contagious disease, particularly for youth. The more they are exposed to it, the more likely they are to catch it. Unfortunately, unlike most other diseases, susceptible youth don't need to be close to violence in order to catch it. They only need to see and hear about it over and over again.

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