The Personality Transformations of a School Shooter

Susan K. Chen, B.A.
Faculty of Health, Department of Psychology, York University

Abstract

Since Columbine, school shootings have become a recurring problem in Western Society. Indeed, Columbine set a standard for school shootings that did not previously exist. To better understand school shooters and shootings, it may be useful to re-examine what we know about Columbine. In what ways were the Columbine gunmen motivated to plan and commit the largest school shooting in the history of the United States? What are the main trajectories in their psychosocial development that led them to their fate and the fate of others? And what personality transformations would they have undergone to launch a manifesto of violence and vengeance into a new era? This research aims to answer these questions by examining the psychology of Columbine beyond mental illness and bullying. More specifically, this research offers insights into the motivations and personality structure of one of the gunmen. By exploring the inner world of the person behind the gun, we can obtain a clearer picture of the personality profile of school shooters as a population and uncover the darker terrains of the human condition that underlie us all. New ways to investigate this population are also discussed.

Introduction

- On April 20, 1999, two senior students entered Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, armed with guns and homemade explosives. They killed 12 students, 1 teacher, and injured dozens of others.
- In the aftermath of Columbine, society blamed violent media, bullying, mental illness, and guns (Brown & Merritt, 2002; Langman, 2009; Lickel et al., 2003). These are poor and problematic explanations. Millions of kids are exposed to these factors, but rarely do they go on a shooting rampage (Langman, 2009).
- New approach to studying school shooters is needed.

Methodology

- **Question:** What was this person’s inner world like? What personality transformations did he undergo to commit the events that he did on April 20, 1999?
- **Rogier Principles, i.e., Client-Centered (Rogiers, 1961)**: “We must look at things from the [person’s] point of view / if we want to know why they act as they do…” (Adler, 1927, p. 38)
- **Thematic analysis** (journal, personal webpage, school assignments, chat logs, hobbies and general interests)
- **Sources:** peer-reviewed articles, documentaries, news articles, original police reports, books, primary sources

Thematic Analysis

- Themes give insight into the perpetrator as an individual and their underlying motivations for the attack.
- Columbine was a way to secure meaning and significance

Thematic Core: Human Nature

“…I would definitely leave behind some things like ancient civilizations have done. Pyramids, stone hedges…"

Core Themes

- Underlying Meaning
- Human Nature
- Dislike for Society
- Individuality, Identity, and Originality
- Existentialism

Discussion

- Personality traits oriented this individual towards this trajectory and how they wanted to make their mark on society and the world.
- Columbine was a way for this individual to fulfill a key developmental task: identity formation.
- Thematic analysis revealed an existential motivation, and not a motivation to solely cause harm.
- May explain why most school shooters post-Columbine reference Columbine before they attack.

Future Research and Conclusion

- Existential motivations and identity should be examined
- Until we understand the person behind the gun, we cannot understand school shooters or predict them. It is easy to differentiate oneself from the ‘monster,’ but this keeps the subject at a distance.
- Rogierian principles are useful beyond clinical contexts
- Should prioritize personology over psychopathology