

Which existential concerns are found in autobiographical expressions of school shooters prior to their crime?

Abstract

One of the few recurring characteristics in school shooters' stories is their expression of existential concerns and questions. Many discuss their hatred of the world and existential loneliness in their manifestos, suicide letters, diary entries or social media updates. These expressions – called leaking – are made during the planning period preceding their deed. They are not only important in terms of prevention, but also help us understand strong layers of meaning in this seemingly irrational and psychopathological behavior. This study involves a narrative analysis of the existential issues in personal expressions of school shooters to shed more light on the existential dimension of their motive. We select six cases (seven school shooters) from known school shootings based on available material and variation in educational context, perpetrator characteristics, and impact.

Keywords: School shooting, existential concerns, leaking, motive school shooter

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century many hundreds of mostly young people have died in school shootings. The social impact is enormous. Traumatized children, parents and teachers wonder why tragedies like these can happen and how one can prevent these crimes. In recent years, researchers have approached this issue solely from their own fields like sociology, psychology, criminology or medicine (Harding, Fox et al. 2002)¹. However, school shootings arise from a number of different risk factors (Robertz, 2004; Newman et al., 2005; Henry, 2009)². Unfortunately, studying isolated factors like bullying or violent computer games as a cause of school shootings does not give reliable answers but leads to a narrowed perspective of the problem and possible polarization in the discussion about prevention. To create a broader view of the problem an international overview of research, cases studies and concepts for prevention was published in 2013. It forms a collection of the latest empirical findings and theoretical concepts and claims to “turn attention to the violence-affirming setting in its entirety” including socialization, institutional circumstances of school

¹ Harding, D. J., Fox, C., & Metha, J. D. (2002). Studying rare events through qualitative case studies: lessons from a study of rampage school shootings. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 31, 174-216.

² Robertz, J. (2004). *School shootings*. Frankfurt: Verlag für Polizeiwissenschaft.
Newman, K. (2005). *Rampage. The social roots of school shootings*. New York: Basic.
Henry, S. (2009). School violence beyond Columbine: A complex problem in need of an interdisciplinary analysis. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52, 1246-1265.
Böckler, N., Seeger, T., & Sitzer, P. (2013). School Shootings: Conceptual Framework and International Empirical Trends. In N. Böckler, T. Seeger, P. Sitzer, W. Heitmeyer, (Eds.). *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies, and Concepts for Prevention* (pp. 1-27). New York: Springer.

life and biographical, psychodynamic background (Böckler, Seeger, et al., 2013). In our opinion one aspect is missing in this overview: the existential concerns the perpetrators experience prior to their crime. The aim of the present paper is to complement the overview by analyzing existential concerns in autobiographic expressions of school shooters prior to their crime. The research question of this study is: Which existential concerns are found in autobiographical expressions of school shooters prior to their crime? Studying the perpetrators' existential concerns contributes to an understanding of their motives. These concerns can be found in documents like suicide letters or manifestos, created by the perpetrators during the phase of planning their deed.

Leaking

A number of researchers argue that a shooting is always planned (O'Toole, 2002; Vossekuil, 2002; Robertz, 2004)³ and during this period the perpetrator almost always announces his plans. This is called leaking. Most perpetrators express their thoughts, feelings and plans via e.g. videos, suicide letters, comments on social media like Facebook, graffiti, or essays. These expressions contain statements about existential themes like life and death, love and hate, isolation and the struggle with their identity, which can help us to understand the crux of their motives.

Arguably, violence by adolescents can be linked to behavioral, biological and social circumstances like playing violent video games, prefrontal deficits, influence of family and social environment (Fryxell and Smith, 2000)⁴, social disintegration and a systematic loss of control (Heitmeyer, Böckler & Seeger, 2013)⁵. Considering the nature of these factors, one could assume that the cause of violent behavior is a deficiency in the perpetrator's life (Carlson, 2003). But existentialists like Hegel and Sartre identify violence as an existential need. Violence, they suggest, helps to overcome limits which frustrate personal freedom and meaningful actions (Stigliano, 1983; Diamond, 1996)⁶. This is not an excuse but a recognition that violence, in some cases, provides an existential reward (Carlson, 2003)⁷. The underlying existential concerns of school shooters can tell more about the existential reward the perpetrators are aiming for and how this concerns affect the motives for this violent act. However, so far no research addressing these existential concerns could be found.

³ O'Toole, M. E. (2002). FBI Expert Says School Shooters Always Give Hints About Plan. *Psychiatric News*, 2-36.

Vossekuil, B. (2002). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. Darby: Diane Publishing.

Robertz, J. (2004). *School shootings*. Frankfurt: Verlag für Polizeiwissenschaft.

⁴ Fryxell, D., & Smith, D. C. (2000). Personal, Social, and Family Characteristics of Angry Students. *Professional School Counseling*, 4 (2), 86-94.

⁵ Heitmeyer, W., Böckler, N., & Seeger, T. (2013). Social Disintegration, Loss of Control, and School Shootings. In N. Böckler, T. Seeger, P. Sitzler, W. Heitmeyer, (Eds.). *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies, and Concepts for Prevention* (pp. 27-54). New York: Springer.

⁶ Stigliano, T. (1983). Jean-Paul Sartre on Understanding Violence. *Crime and Social Justice* (19) *Crisis in Theory and Social Policy*, pp. 52-64.

Diamond, S. A., (1996). *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic: The Psychological Genesis of Violence, Evil and Creativity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

⁷ Carlson, L. A. (2003). Existential theory: Helping school counselors attend to youth at risk for violence. *Professional school counseling*, 6, 310-315.

Five existential concerns

Existential concerns, as addressed in this article, are related to the view of life and death, the freedom of the individual and the responsibility for one’s actions, the awareness that one is fundamentally alone and the problem of meaning (Yalom, 1980)⁸. Ernest Becker (1973)⁹ argues that the fear of death is the foundation of all existential concerns. He states that the fear of losing our own life makes us use violence against others. By killing others we create an illusion of being invulnerable. This is an attempt to deny the reality that we are mortal. Consequently, a school shooting can be an expression of the perpetrator’s existential concerns.

Based on Yalom, Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006)¹⁰ state that the five major existential concerns are: death, isolation, identity, freedom and meaning. These originate from the knowledge that death is inescapable, that identity, beliefs and values are uncertain, that the array of choices one has is flustering and that essentially everyone is alone. Although these concerns are traditionally discussed in the field of philosophy, Koole et al. (2006) empirically investigate the role these concerns play in psychological functioning, to understand how these issues affect human behavior and experience. In fact, Koole (2008)¹¹ states that “existential concerns are a major force in human behavior, and that ignoring these concerns only serves to deepen the psychological conflicts that are associated with them”. Experimental studies point out that those existential concerns have an immense influence on people’s emotions, thoughts and deeds (Koole et al., 2006). The question addressed in our study is what – if any – role these concerns play in the lives of school shooters prior to their deed.

Figure 1: The five existential concerns and the existential problems they represent (Koole, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2006)

Existential Concerns	Existential Problem
Death	Psychological conflict between mortality and the desire to live forever
Isolation	Conflict between the wish to be connected to others and experiences of rejection; realization that one’s subjective experience of reality can never be fully shared
Identity	A clear sense of who one is and how one fits into the world versus uncertainties because of conflicts between self-aspects, unclear boundaries between self and non-self, or limited self-insight
Freedom	Experience of free will versus external forces that impact behavior and the burden of responsibility for one’s choices in response to a complex array of alternatives
Meaning	Desire to believe life is meaningful versus events and experiences that appear random or inconsistent with one’s bases of meaning

⁸ Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

⁹ Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. New York: Free Press Paperback.

¹⁰ Koole, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Introducing science to the psychology of the soul: Experimental existential psychology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 212-216.

¹¹ Koole, S. (2008, November 4). *Existential Psychology*. Retrieved from: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/228014843_Existential_Psychology/file/9fcfd5049e4e768b50.pdf

Method

Selected school shooters

To answer the research question the contents of perpetrators' original statements referring to the planned shooting were analyzed. Firstly, a number of school shooters were selected. Given the small number of potential cases, we opted for theoretical selection to maximize heterogeneity. We selected cases based on differing contexts of the educational system; differences in age and social circumstances of the perpetrator; the impact (number of deaths) of the deed and the quantity of trustworthy material we could find.

Selected materials

Original documents and videos in English and German were used because crucial information could get lost in translation from other languages we are not familiar with. The selection was restricted to documents and videos which the perpetrators had produced themselves prior to the shooting and which had a direct reference to the crime. Unless otherwise stated, all original expressions of the school shooters and transcriptions of their videos come from Peter Langman's website www.schoolshooters.info.¹² We translated documents written in German.

Figure 2: Selected school shooters and materials

Name	Age	Incident	Impact	Material
1 Luke Woodham	16	Mississippi, USA: 1 st October 1997, Pearl High School, Pearl	Kills his mother and two students at school; Serving three life terms and an additional 140 years in prison	Several writings: 4 pages
2 "Kip" Kipland Kinkel	15	Oregon, USA: 21 st May 1998, Thurston High School, Springfield	After killing his parents he kills two people at school; serving a 111-year sentence without parole	Journal, essay: 5.5 pages
3 Eric Harris	18	Colorado, USA: 20 th April 1999, Columbine High School, Columbine	13 people killed, shooters commit suicide	Journal, writings in school planner: Harris 2,5 pages; Klebold 3,5 pages
4 Dylan Klebold	17			
5 Sebastian Bosse	18	Germany, Europe: 20th November 2006, Geschwister Scholl Schule, Emsdetten	5 people injured by firearm, many more by smoke bombs, shooter commits suicide	Suicide note: 3 pages
6 Seung-Hui Cho	23	Virginia, USA: 16th April 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg	32 people killed, shooter commits suicide	Manifesto: 9 pages
7 Pekka-Eric Auvinen	18	Finland, Europe: 7th November 2007, Jokela High School, Tuusula	8 people killed, shooter commits suicide	3 online documents, confession video: 9,5 pages

¹²Dr. Langman is a psychologist and the author of *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (2010). He is a sought-after expert on the psychology of youths who commit rampage school shootings. All the material on his website appear to be trustworthy.

The five existential concerns in the texts

For the data analysis the five existential concerns are used as categories to analyze the text. The subcategories were developed in an inductive way. For example, the expressions *I want to die* or *I will kill myself* are found in the texts and therefore the subcategory suicide was attached to the category death. This leads to the following list of subcategories:

- * Death: murder, suicide and mortality
- * Isolation: feeling outcast, loneliness, rejection
- * Identity: I-see-myself, you-see-me, I-see-you, I-want-to-be
- * Freedom: responsibility, free will
- * Meaning: hope, faith, purpose

The documents were analyzed per case and all together.

Quantitative Content Analyses

To analyze the expressions methods of quantitative content analyses (Bortz & Döring, 2006)¹³ were used.

Frequency analysis

We looked at how frequent existential concerns occurred in the texts. This led to an assessment of the relative importance of the various concerns for the perpetrators. The following categories are used: Top frequency (TF) when a concern is found more than 60%; high frequency (HF) for occurrences between 41%-60%; medium frequency (MF) 21%-40%; low frequency (LF) 1%-20%.

Valence analysis

We analyzed how the existential concerns were valued in the text. The range was positive, negative, and neutral.

Pattern analysis

Finally, we analyzed which existential concerns occurred together more frequently than others in individual cases and in the cases together.

Results

The analysis of the autobiographical documents shows clearly that school shooters experience acute existential concerns. Two existential concerns are found in every case: death and identity. Isolation is found in five cases. Notably, expressions of feeling isolated are always expressed very emotional and strong. In most cases the shooters feel superior and are frustrated that no one else seems to acknowledge their superiority. They feel rejected and do not know how to cope with that. Meaning, also found in five cases, is mostly expressed as a disappointment in reality and life. 'Normal' life - school, work, having a family - is meaningless to them.

The results are presented per existential concern and in the pattern they arise.

Death

Death is found in all documents and always in a top frequency except in Sebastian Bosse's text, where death is found in a low frequency. Suicide and murder are related to death in all cases. In four cases the concept of mortality is mentioned. A positive value is assigned to

¹³ Bortz, J., & Döring, N. (2006). Quantitative Methode der Dataerhebung. In J. Bortz, & N. & Döring, *Forschungsmethoden und Evaluation für Human- und Sozialwissenschaftler* (pp. 137-293). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.

murder in all cases. Murder is seen as a way of being more powerful than others and of being able to choose who will live and who will die. Auvinen says in his video manifesto: “I, as a natural selector, will eliminate all who I see unfit, disgraces of human race and failures of natural selection.” Suicide is also valued as positive in all cases, as a way of ending suffering. However, suicide is also valued as negative in three cases in the form of feeling sorry for the pain caused to family and friends. Mortality is found in four cases and has a neutral value.

Isolation

Isolation is found in a text in five cases and is then always used with top frequency. In all these cases the perpetrators feel lonely, rejected and treated like outcasts. In each of the cases isolation is valued negatively. The perpetrators point out that isolation is one motive for their deed. All feel that they are being treated as outcasts by other students, teachers and society. Woodham writes that “no one ever truly loved me. No one ever truly cared about me. (...) And all throughout my life I was ridiculed. Always beaten, always hated”.

Identity

As with the concern about death, all perpetrators discuss concerns over identity in their writings. In five cases the concern occurs with a top frequency, once with a high frequency and once in a low frequency. Six perpetrators mention how they are seen by others and all discuss how they see themselves. In three cases there is an expression of who-I-want-to-be but notably all perpetrators express who or what they do not want to be. Interestingly, the shooters have a positive self-image except Kinkel and Woodham. Kinkel writes “I don’t know who I am. I want to be something I can never be. I try so hard every day. But in the end, I hate myself for what I’ve become.” In all the other cases the perpetrators feel superior to others and emphasize that they are very different from other people. This difference is always seen as positive because they disregard others and feel that they are superior. Their feelings of superiority lead in four cases to expressions of feeling God-like. The latter point is expressed by Auvinen by saying: “compared to you retarded masses, I am actually godlike.”

Freedom

Freedom is discussed in the expressions of four shooters, twice in medium frequency, once in low frequency, and once in high frequency. It takes the form of, for example, a feeling that their personal freedom is in conflict with the demands of society. Freedom itself is always valued as a positive thing, but it is often accompanied by the negative restriction of freedom. Bosse writes: “I am free! No one has the right to interfere in my life, and if someone does so anyway then he has to accept the consequences!”.

Meaning

Meaning is discussed in five cases, twice in medium frequency, twice in low frequency, and once in a top frequency. One could argue that death, identity, isolation and freedom are also related to meaning and therefore that these percentages are inaccurate. However, we choose to look at the existential concern of meaning separately and as defined by Yalom (1980): the wish that life is meaningful versus the experience that some events are inconsistent with their bases of meaning. In all five cases meaning is valued as negative. The perpetrators are disappointed in the reality of life. In two cases meaning is also valued as neutral. For example, Auvinen argues that “life is just a meaningless coincidence”.

Pattern

Overall, death/identity and death/isolation are most frequently combined. The perpetrators

see themselves as avenging angels, killing others because they are tormenting people like them. They feel often unloved and singled out and as revenge they fantasize about murder.

Figure 3: Most combined existential concerns per case

School shooter	Most combined existential concerns
Woodham	Death-isolation; death-identity
Kinkel	Death-isolation
Harris	Death-identity
Klebold	Death-isolation; death-identity
Bosse	Meaning-freedom; death-meaning
Cho	Death-isolation; death-identity
Auvinen	Death-identity

Conclusion

Considering all cases in this study it is clear that existential concerns play an important role in the life of the perpetrators and presumably in the development of a school shooting. Apparently, to them their life's do not live up to the standard set by their role models. The perpetrators seem to consider their deed meaningful. Like an avenging angel or superhero, they take revenge for injustice, rejection and bullying. Because they feel superior, they argue that they have the right to kill inferiors. The narcissistic self-image - feeling God-like - combined with rejection or insults leads to a high level of aggression towards the source of complaint. Notably, under the same circumstances low self-esteem does not lead to that kind of aggression (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998)¹⁴. One has to consider that many adolescents have a favorable self-image but cope with insult without becoming school shooters. However, in the studied cases, a sense of isolation combined with narcissistic traits amplifies the development of aggression against the sources of the insult and rejection. The shooters find it unbearable that other people question their identity by not acknowledging their superiority. Defending their superiority, they want to demonstrate their power by choosing who may live and who has to die. These boys hold the whole world - and their world at this point is mostly their school - responsible for their existential concerns and consequently kill students and teachers.

Discussion

One element that has not been addressed so far is the fact that all perpetrators in this study are male. That is not a random choice but based on the statistic that school shooters are principally boys. Psychologists and psychiatrics claim that boys experience a crisis in current society (Pollack, 2001; Kindlon and Thomson, 2000; Dykstra, Cole & Capps, 2009)¹⁵. Especially in Western society - school shootings are primarily a Western phenomenon - boys

¹⁴ Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75 (1), 219-229.

¹⁵ Pollack, W.S. & Shuster, T. (2001). *Real Boys' Voices*. New York: Penguin Books.
 Kindlon, D., & Thompson, M. (2000). *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. New York: Ballantine Books.
 Dykstra, R., Cole, A., & Capps, D. (2009). *Losers, loners en rebellen: Hoe tienerjongens zich ontwikkelen* (pp. 115-149). Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok.

struggle with feelings of isolation, frustration and the inability to handle their emotions (Pollack, 1998)¹⁶. Walter Wink (1992)¹⁷ argues that the idea that violence solves all conflicts is a powerful myth of the modern Western world.

Many expressions in the documents reveal that the perpetrators feel God-like when fantasizing about murdering people. They claim that with their deed they do what God should have done, killing inferiors. Justifying the shooting as an act of freeing the world from evil or inferior people is found in all the documents in some way. These boys use violence to feel superior and powerful, like the role models society creates. Society defines what a 'real man' should be and from a young age male heroes are presented as victorious because of violence.

The desire of being superior of the school shooters versus the impossibility to meet with Western male role models, leads to struggles like *I feel lonely, no one understands me, there is no real purpose in life, I am outcast*. To get redeemed from these struggles and to feel superior and powerful some boys reach out to extreme violence.

In the light of preventing school shootings one must address the existential concerns of young people. Society has to examine its ways of legitimizing male violence. Schools must play a role in a nonviolent education where students learn how to express their feelings. They need to have room for existential questions and staff who can teach how to approach these issues. Teachers, coaches, parents, and all others who interact with young people must be able to give them the needed empathy and attention so their existential concerns do not go undetected like they did in the cases of these school shooters.

¹⁶ Pollack, W.S. (1998). *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Penguin Books.

¹⁷ Wink, W. (1992). *Engaging the powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress.