

2019

# Characteristics of Fame-Seeking Individuals Who Completed or Attempted Mass Murder in the United States

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Angelica Wills

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Characteristics of Fame-Seeking Individuals Who Completed or Attempted Mass Murder  
in the United States

by

Angelica Wills

MS, Walden University, 2016

BA, Stockton University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

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June 2019

## Abstract

Previous researchers have found mass murderers characterized as loners, victims of bullying, goths, and individuals who had a psychotic break. A gap in the literature that remained concerned the motive and mindset of mass murderers before their attack, particularly those who seek fame, and why they are motivated by such violent intentions. The purpose of this study was to provide a deeper analysis of the characteristics of fame-seeking individuals who have completed or attempted mass murder, as well as insight into their behavior on social media. The conceptual framework consisted of a constructivist model, which guided the exploration the purposeful sample of 12 Americans who completed or attempted mass murder. The research questions aligned with themes provided by Bandura's social learning theory, Sulloway's theory of birth order and family dynamics, Millon and Davis's theories of psychopathy, O'Toole's findings on the copycat effect, and Lankford's criteria for fame-seeking mass murderers, and guided an analysis of open-source data. Six main themes among fame-seeking individuals in the United States who had completed or attempted mass murder emerged: (a) fame as primary motivation, (b) preoccupation with violence, (c) presence of specific role models/copycat behavior, (d) strong opinions about society/racial groups, (e) symptoms of narcissism/mood disorder/personality disorder, and (f) failed relationships. These findings add to the knowledge about mass murder and fame seeking. Social change may occur through recommended evaluation of and improvements in current mental health approaches, improved threat assessment, expanded education on characteristics of mass murderers, and dissemination of information related to mass murder.

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## Dedication

For my husband, Jon, who supported me through this process, from our first discussion over pizza, to staying up late listening to me ramble, and now at the end. Thank you for all your support and love through this journey and every aspect of my life. There are not enough words to express my gratitude and love for you.

For my daughter, who constantly provides me with much-needed love and smiles, as well as understanding and kindness beyond her years.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### Introduction

Mass murder accounts for approximately 15% of homicides in the United States (Auxemery, 2015; Hamlett, 2017). Despite having a low frequency, mass murder receives a significant amount of air time on the broadcast news (Azrael, & Miller, 2014; Bondü & Beier, 2015; Cohen, Azrael, & Miller, 2014; Follman, 2015b; Hamlett, 2017; Huff-Corzine et al., 2014; Lowe & Galea, 2017; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo- Chavez, 2015). When the Columbine school shooting occurred on April 20, 1999, in suburban Denver, Colorado, it became the third most-watched event on television, followed by the Rodney King incident and TWA flight crash of that decade (Mears, Moon, & Thielo, 2017). The media often bring “experts” to give opinions about the event before all the facts have emerged; as a result, moral panic ensues (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015). Moral panic is the way in which the public reacts to a real or perceived threat, often in response to the media presenting an overabundance of information before collecting all the facts (Meloy, 2014).

The male-to-female mass murderer ratio is approximately 24:1 (Stone, 2015), with around 60% of mass murder attributed to individuals with mental illness (Duwe, 2013). Other mass murder risk factors include mental deficiencies and suicidal thoughts (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Stone, 2015), as well as social failures, wrongdoings, and perceived slights (Langman, 2017c; Stone, 2015). Bullying as a contributing factor to mass murder has received vigorous study since the Columbine High School shooting. In attempting to find a direct link between bullying and violence, researchers have found

some offenders endured bullying, while others did not (Langman, 2009; Mears et al., 2017).

In the infancy of the research, there was belief in the idea that mass murderers lost control of their impulses and suddenly became violently angry (Meloy, 2014). However, evidence to the contrary suggests that mass murder is planned days, weeks, and even months prior to the event (Langman, 2017c; O'Toole et al., 2014). Some researchers have posited that elements of fantasy are involved (Murray, 2015). Others have proposed that mass murders are easily profiled, incidents of mass murder are on the rise, firearms are not an issue, drug abuse/use is involved, and the most debated opinion that mass murder is easy to predict (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Meloy, 2014).

In Chapter 1, I introduce and highlight issues with mass murder in relation to the way mass murderers idolize and seek fame. The research gap is the lack of exploratory research on psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking mass murders, as well as their behavior on social media. Two research questions guided a qualitative multiple case study for exploring the characteristics of fame-seeking mass murderers. These characteristics included psychological, social, and personality traits, as well as preoffense behaviors, all included in a profile and identified as potential risk factors. In this chapter, I also present a list of operational definitions, provide an outline of assumptions, and outline the process of sample selection. Following those key elements, I discuss the limitations of qualitative research involving credibility, transferability, and dependability as outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2009).

The primary assumption is that fame-seeking mass murderers may share similar psychosocial characteristics as well as preoffense behavior (also known as leakage behavior). Researchers have found this preoffense behavior, combined with the idolization of role models and the contagion effect, to be common among fame-seeking mass murderers. Lankford (2016b) noted that past researchers and scholars have identified fame-seeking behavior in mass murderers; however, fame-seeking has not been the focal point of any research study, particularly from a clinical psychological lens. Fame seeking mass rampage shooters, according to Lankford (2016b), are typically around 20 years old; in comparison, the average age of nonschool rampage shooters is 34.5 years . Fame-seeking rampage shooters kill an average of seven victims, whereas nonfame-seeking murders kill an average of three victims. Fame-seeking rampage shooters wound an average of eight individual; comparatively, nonfame-seeking shooters wound around four (Lankford, 2016b).

I also present the significance of this research study also in Chapter 1. I discuss the evolution of social media, which comes with the evolution of the perpetrator and crime. Current researchers indicated the desire to become more innovative and creative drives individuals wishing to seek fame during mass murder, thus changing the ways of achieving fame (Lankford 2016b). Implications for social change addressed for this study include identifying how recognizing these potential risk factors can aid society in multiple ways. Family members and peers can help individuals in seeking treatment, and law enforcement can work on creating more proactive, rather than reactive, means of threat assessment (Capellan & Lewandowski, 2018). In addition, increased awareness



and understanding of fame-seeking mass murderers may have significant implications for future research and positive social change for mental health in general. I hope the findings from this study can aid in reducing public fear and the stigma for those suffering from mental illness by differentiating fame-seeking individuals from the general profile of mass murderers.

### **Background**

Risk factors have undergone previous examination to create a profile for a mass murderer. Some of these risk factors are loss of social support, loss of parental figures, loss of financial resources, and personality features (Langman, 2017a). Personality features include being rigid, obsessive, self-involved, narcissistic, and paranoid, and having a growing resentment toward society (Auxemery, 2015). McGee and DeBernardo (1999) conducted a study of 14 school shooters, whom they termed *classroom avengers*. The most common characteristics among the shooters were that they were Caucasian, from a middle-class socioeconomic status, and living in a rural or suburban area. They also found evidence of offenders having a substantial mental pathological history, lack of mental deficiencies, existing attraction to violence, significant depression, personality disorder(s), evidence of planning, and social alienation (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999).

The media has had a significant causal effect on crime. Experts and the general public rationalized and scrutinized events such as the shooting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Virginia, as they occurred in real time (Auxemery, 2015), with discussion of the event on Internet blogs. The World Health Organization began a nationwide discussion as to how to transcribe homicide and suicide

to the media (Auxemery, 2015). In other cases, such as the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, a vast amount of information emerged over a 24-hour period with insufficient time for the general public to process the information, causing many to start making assumptions and conjectures (Mears et al., 2017).

Rationalizations for potential causal factors leading to mass murders have included lax restrictions and access to guns (Fox & Fridel, 2016), lack of involvement in school, and loner status (Mears et al., 2017; Rokach, 2017). The media has also shaped societal response to crime, with mass murder having a place in popular culture. Young adults and adolescents have become fascinated with past crimes, particularly Columbine, and prior offenders. Langman (2017b) discussed the various role models with whom many previous mass murderers have become fascinated, breaking them down into categories including peer influences, media violence, and role models/ideology. Along with *role models*, other words such as *contagion* and *copycat* have appeared. Contagion in the general sense may refer to the idea that mass attacks may be more prevalent. Used in the specific sense, contagion refers to a specific perpetrator having an influence on other individuals (Langman, 2017b). The use of copycat often appears interchangeable with the latter definition of contagion (Langman, 2017b).

O'Toole et al. (2014) discussed the copycat effect and the adverse influence it has had on the general population and social media. As O'Toole et al. noted, past researchers have identified the contagion effect with suicide, subsequently applying these terms to criminal behavior such as homicide. Although research is scarce on mass murder, data on suicide show copycat behavior increases when reported heavily by the media (O'Toole et

al., 2014). This is due to the celebrity status given to the offenders, including a detailed account of the incident, round-the-clock coverage, and glamorization (2014).

As identified by Lankford (2016b), fame-seeking mass murderers have made direct statements regarding a desire to achieve fame. Examples include Eric Harris (1999), who claimed it would be “fun” to finally get recognition after commission of the crime (Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017). Similarly, in Parkland, Florida, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School mass shooting perpetrator Nicholas Cruz (2018) bragged on YouTube, “Im [*sic*] going to be a professional school shooter” (Goldman & Mazzei, 2018).

### **Problem Statement**

The research problem addressed in this study is the need for studies regarding mass murder prevention (Rokach, 2017), as well as the concept of fame and how mass murderers may find innovative ways in achieving fame as technology advances (Lankford, 2016b). The amount of research on mass murderers has grown over the last decade, particularly after the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Lankford, 2016a; Meloy, 2015).

Past researchers have focused on proposals for change, largely aimed at gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Previous researchers of school shooters revealed precipitating factors such as suicidality, mental illness, or depression (Langman 2017c; Lankford, 2015); others concluded that mass murderers feel underappreciated or mistreated in areas such as work or school (Cullen, 2009; Langman 2017c; Lankford, 2016a). Some mass murderers experienced delusions of grandeur and believed that

obtaining higher body counts than their predecessors would lead to instant fame and notoriety, often using the incident at Columbine High School as their blueprint (Langman, 2017b; Lankford, 2016a). Despite some research on the mass murderer, what remains unknown is the motive and mindset of mass murderers before they commit their rampage killing (Eskey, O'Connor, Rush, & Schmallegger, 2015), and why individuals commit such crimes for the sake of fame.

It has become more apparent from recent research that mass murderers will commit murder with fame as the priority (Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017; Rokach, 2017), something that warrants further investigation. A detailed analysis of individuals identified as fame seeking is necessary to address this gap and to provide an expansion of the literature on the psychosocial characteristics and social media activity of fame-seeking mass murderers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My purpose in this study was to provide an analysis into the characteristics of fame-seeking individuals who attempted or completed mass murder in the United States, as well as insight into their behavior on social media. My hope is that results will provide law enforcement a clearer insight to effectively conduct threat assessments to support mass murder prevention efforts, including analyzing threats, determining and mitigating risk, and providing recommendations for appropriate institutions and populations. With this additional knowledge, I hope that law enforcement and mental health personnel can identify at-risk individuals and provide intervention and support before a mass violence event can occur (Bondü & Scheithauer, 2015).

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions helped me to address the identified research gap, which is that mass murder still needs more research, particularly with regard to threat assessment and prevention (Rokach, 2017). The research questions also guided me into a more in-depth exploration of fame-seeking individuals who wished to commit mass murder (Lankford, 2016b), with emphasis placed on the social media behavior.

*Research Question 1:* What are the unexplored psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?

*Research Question 2:* What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame on social media platforms?

## **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Previous researchers such as Langman (2015c) and Lankford (2013, 2016b) have studied fame-seeking behavior in mass murderers. However, the mentality behind this rampage behavior remained largely unstudied until the present day. Researchers have directed even less attention to the psychosocial characteristics of mass murderers and how those individuals express fame on social media platforms. The constructivist model and basis for this study included Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, Sulloway's (1996) theory of birth order and family dynamics, Millon and Davis's (1996) personality theories, O'Toole's (2014) findings on the copycat effect, and Lankford's (2016b) criteria for fame-seeking mass murderers. I used this model as guidance for collecting

and analyzing data for this study, and as a blueprint for thematic coding during data analysis to answer the research questions.

### **Bandura's Social Learning Theory**

According to social learning theory, as supported by various other researchers (Auxemery, 2015; Björkqvist, 2015; Healy, 2015; Lankford, 2016a; Towers et al., 2015), expectations appear in masculine culture as well as hierarchies in male cultural groups. These appearances support the concept of copycat mass murder, as aggression and violence, especially in men, often merit acceptance and support, considered part of masculine identity (Hamlett, 2017; Lankford, 2016b). Social learning theory also provided a framework for analyzing the psychosocial characteristics and family dynamics of the study subjects. Millon's (Millon & Davis, 1996) subtypes of psychopathology served as a guide for developing a search method for psychosocial characteristics of the study subjects. Millon and Davis presented several subtypes of psychopathy related to examining the psychosocial characteristics of offenders, many of whom displayed a form of personality disorder or psychopathy before their killing spree (Langman 2013; Langman, 2017c; Millon & Davis, 1996).

### **Sulloway's Theory of Birth Order**

Another theoretical perspective examined was birth order and family dynamics related to Sulloway's (1996) theory. This theory helped support research regarding the biological development of the mass murderer with a specific look at personality and psychological biological features. In addition, family systems theory added support for this research. According to Bowen's theory of human behavior, the family is a unit with

interconnections between each member; thus, a change in one member of the family affects others. For example, anxiety in one member spreads throughout the family unit (Kerr, 2002). In the case of some mass murderers, depression, anxiety, and even mental illness appeared intergenerationally among family members (Langman, 2016e).

### **Copycat Effect**

In the present day, individuals often find a role model in previous mass murderers. Various other factors come into play, such as priming, desensitization, and arousal (Helfgott, 2014; O'Toole et al., 2014). In the case of Columbine, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold wanted to “one up” Timothy McVeigh, and spent a significant amount of time obsessing about the Oklahoma City bombing (Langman, 2017b). O'Toole et al. discussed this copycat effect and the negative effect it has had on the society and social media usage. The researchers also found the copycat effect applied to suicide. O'Toole et al. clarified that, although the research is minimal in relation to mass murder, the data on suicide show an increase in copycat behavior with heavy incident reporting by the media. This increase is due to increased attention given to the incidents, including a detailed account, constant flooding of the news channels, and glamorization of perpetrators. The copycat effect served to provide a framework for examining fame-seeking behavior of mass murderers as evidenced by how they behaved on social media.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I focused on mass murderers, the psycholinguistic writings of mass murderers, initial findings of fame-seeking mass murders, narcissism among fame-seeking mass murders, and copycat behavior among mass murders (Golbeck, 2016;

Hamlett, 2017; Langman 2018; Lankford, 2016b, 2016c). Included in this study were individuals who either intended to or did commit mass murder while making direct statements revealing a wish to achieve recognition. Lankford (2016b) identified such individuals as fame seeking.

A grounded theory approach using open-source public data involving multiple cases allowed me to answer the two research questions in this study. Open source public data were essentially, as subjects were deceased or imprisoned. I examined a purposeful sample of 12 fame-seeking individuals who planned or conducted mass murder attacks in the United States, procuring information from open-source data beginning from when Columbine occurred in 1999 to the present, or the past 20 years. I examined this sample of documented cases to provide deeper analysis of the psychosocial characteristics and social media activity to have a better understanding of individuals identified as fame seeking and to discern what the data can provide. Qualitative research provided the means to achieve necessary insight and deeper understanding of these fame-seeking mass murderers. I examined data for themes in relation to the research questions posed.

### **Definitions**

*Active shooter event:* An active shooter event is one in which an individual is in the process of actively attempting to kill people in a public area (FBI, n.d.). These events are similar to *mass public shootings*; however, no deaths have occurred yet.

*Columbine effect:* This term is a reference to the increases in mass violence after the Columbine shootings, measures surrounding school safety, as well as public anxiety and panic surrounding mass shootings and mass murder (Guy, 2015; Madfis, 2016).



*Contagion effect:* Also used to refer to *copycat effect*, the contagion effect occurs when individuals seek to commit crime in a similar fashion to a previous event, generally by way of imitation. Often, imitation is apparent by the behaviors reported by media coverage of crime (Helfgott, 2015).

*Copycat effect:* Like the *contagion effect*, copycat effect is the idea that the likelihood of suicide and homicide increases following highly reported and glamorized suicides, homicides, and even mass murders (O'Toole et al., 2014).

*Leakage:* Leakage is means of communication by an individual to a third party that reveal intent to harm. This behavior can be in the form of direct communications, writings, postings on the Internet, or subtler forms, such as drawings (Silver, Horgan, & Gill, 2017).

*Mass shooting:* A mass shooting is an event where a perpetrator kills or attempts to kill at least four or more victims in a single location with a firearm. Usually, the event occurs within a 24-hour period and does not involve criminal activity driven by profit, such as gang activity (Silva & Capellan, 2018).

*Open-source public data:* Open-access public source data are typically data that are digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions. One means of obtaining such information is the FBI Freedom of Information Act (United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

*Pathway warning behavior:* Pathway warning behaviors are behaviors that precede acts of violence, often targeted violence, serving as warning signs (Cohen et al., 2014).

*Psycholinguistics*: Applying this field of linguistics involves examining the psychological significance and application in writing (Hamlett, 2017; Hörmann, 1971).

*Rampage shooters*: Also referred to as *active shooters* or *public mass shooters*, rampage shooters generally kill bystanders or victims unknown to them, in addition to targeted victims (Lankford, 2016a).

### **Assumptions**

My main assumption was that fame-seeking mass murderers have characteristics, personality traits, family dynamics, and social characteristics that are measurable and able to be profiled (Lankford, 2016b). Another assumption is that open-source data on such offenders are easily accessible and available. I also assumed that numbers of fame-seeking mass murderers will continue to grow, fame-seeking mass murderers will try and outdo their predecessors, and fame-seeking mass murderers will implement new ways to gain attention, making it difficult to determine the line between being famous and being infamous (Lankford, 2016b). The development of social media and the ability to livestream make it easy to achieve instant fame; in recent years, mass murderers have gained more notoriety via these avenues. Furthermore, current belief is that present-day mass murderers will mirror the behavior of past mass murderers (Langman, 2017b; O'Toole, et al., 2014). However, in this study, I attempted to discover how mass murderers differ when seeking fame and how they are innovative in the commission of crime.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

I conducted this research study to address the knowledge gap regarding the psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking mass murderers. Lankford (2016b) identified previous knowledge gaps with regard to fame-seeking mass murder. Until Lankford's research, fame-seeking in mass murder remained largely unstudied. Lankford found that fame-seeking mass murderers have become more prevalent in the past 40 years, kill and wound more than other mass murderers, and are typically younger than other mass murderers. With this information, as yet unperformed was a more in-depth analysis that could provide a psychological glance into the mindset of fame-seeking mass murderers. I explored that gap by examining the psychosocial and fame-seeking dimensions of individuals who have attempted or completed mass murder.

I selected a purposeful sample of 12 individuals who completed or attempted mass murder, as identified in the introduction of this chapter. For the purpose of this study, I used the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) definition of mass murder, which is the killing of four or more individuals (excluding the perpetrator) in one event, with no cooling-off period (2005/2008). I restricted the subjects in this study to mass murderers who committed crimes in the United States. The risk involved in using this limited population was that it is not representative of mass murderers worldwide. Although Lankford (2016b) found that the United States appears to have 75% of offenders who seek fame, this may change with advancements in technology, as the spread of knowledge becomes easier. To best minimize these risks, I carefully assessed all

available information and research before fully committing to my selection of my study subjects.

Creswell (2014) highlighted that the goal of a qualitative study is to provide more insight about a specific population sample or phenomenon. Due to the smaller sample size and typical absence of statistical computations, qualitative results are not directly transferable to broader populations. Findings may not be applicable to other contexts, such as fame-seeking mass murderers outside the United States. Detailed documentation of research methods, assumptions, and processes served to strengthen transferability.

### **Limitations**

According to the parameters regarding a qualitative case study as set forth by Creswell (2012), the results of this study were not generalizable to a broad population. This is mainly due to the narrow focus and modest sample size, in the case, 12 individuals. Creswell and Creswell (2009) suggested qualitative type sampling, otherwise known as purposeful sampling, in which the researcher selects participants to best answer the research question(s) and fill the gap. Some of information involved in this case study was unavailable as part of the Freedom of Information Act due to exemptions placed on certain types of crimes and related evidence. Exemptions could include national defense, invasion of personal privacy, and interference with enforcement proceedings (United States Department of Justice, n.d.).

Limitations existed with the credibility and authenticity of document and materials, transferability due to population, dependability based on the collection process, and confirmability based on the researcher's role (Creswell & Creswell, 2009), all of

which were issues when dealing with fame-seeking mass murderers. Approximately half of the sample is deceased; hence, obtaining accurate firsthand anecdotal evidence was not possible. I needed to obtain data from multiple sources and verify, to the best of my ability, that the data were accurate, making sure not to obtain all data from the same source. Because the study comprised 12 mass murderers, yet another limitation was an inability to extrapolate the findings to all mass murderers and fame-seeking individuals in the United States as whole.

The process by which I gathered, coded, and analyzed data, particularly analysis of communications of the mass murderers, produced validity issues. These validity issues included errors produced by prior researcher as well as error in presentation of the research. Creswell and Creswell (2009) noted that researchers are neither equally skilled in writing nor equally skilled at gathering information and being insightful. The burden is on the researcher to seek out information hidden in the vast depths of the Internet. Some material may also be incomplete, especially open-source data, and it is up to the researcher to refrain from making assumptions that the data is complete. Being able to determine authenticity of documents is important, as well (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). Meloy (2015) discussed hindsight bias and cautioned researchers to avoid making assumptions before gathering and examining accurate data.

Most of the mass murders have either committed suicide, or committed “suicide by cop.” Nobody could ask the perpetrators about what they were thinking during the commission of a crime. It was important to not speculate on events based on opinion or the ideas that the event was more predictable than it was or that evidence was more

readily available (Meloy, 2015). As a researcher in the process, I had to take care to leave out my own personal beliefs and biases, which may indeed have developed due to the highly publicized nature of these cases, with hours and even days of news coverage.

### **Significance**

In this study, I addressed the psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking mass murderers in terms of psychosocial characteristics and preoffense behavior (including leakage behavior). As a result, the hope is that this research aided in identifying factors that influence fame-seeking mass murderers. Recognizing threats and warning indicators provided through leakage behavior can aid law enforcement in providing better means of risk management (Capellan & Lewandowski, 2018). This includes more efficient threat identification, leading to more efficient risk management, which can aid in making communities safer and decreasing moral panic.

I attempted to achieve these goals by providing a deeper exploration into the mindset of mass murderers, particularly those motivated by the desire for fame and notoriety. Identifying these risk factors may lead to threat assessment to aid law enforcement, schools, and other appropriate institutions in taking safety precautions. Paying attention to the means of identifying high-risk individuals can also prove useful (Hamlett, 2017; Meloy, 2016). Capellan and Lewandowski (2018) cited the importance of increasing knowledge of how law enforcement gathers information in the face of a growing need need for departments to work together to identify “red flag indicators.” These red flag indicators could potentially lead to more accurate threat assessment (Capellan & Lewandowski, 2018).

As mentioned by Lankford (2016b), social media is evolving, and the need to evaluate the methods by which fame-seeking mass murderers operate is necessary. Social media is not only an avenue of spreading messages, but a way for offenders to seek role models and copy behavior (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2016, O'Toole et al., 2014; Semenov, Veijalainen, & Kyppo, 2010). Knowing the risk factors, to include potential psychosocial factors associated with fame-seeking mass murder, can aid in creating a threat assessment plan. In addition, family, peers, and school administrators can be aware of the signs and risk factors associated with fame-seeking individuals wishing to attempt mass murder.

### **Summary and Transition**

Despite assertions that mass murder events are not increasing and continue to be rare events (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Madfis, 2017; Meloy, 2014), these incidents continue to gain notoriety and continuous news converge throughout the mainstream media and social media platforms. In fact, many researchers speculate that incidents are on the rise (Bondü & Beier, 2015; Cohen, Azrael, & Miller, 2014; Follman, 2015b; Hamlett, 2017; Huff-Corzine et al., 2014; Lowe & Galea, 2017; Towers, et al., 2015). Researchers, academic scholars, and victims have created petitions and campaigns against giving mass murderers notoriety and fame (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Researchers have suggested that more recent mass murderers are killing simply to gain fame, notoriety, and higher body counts, rather than for purposes such as revenge and righting perceived wrongs (Langman, 2017b; Lankford, 2016b). Due to this recent shift in motivations, the focus of this research was mass murderers identified as fame-seeking, specifically those who

made statements of wanting to achieve fame and recognition. A deeper analysis on the background of these individuals helped to identify commonalities and shared traits, with a specific focus on psychosocial characteristics and social characteristic associated with fame seeking.

In Chapter 2, I present recent and landmark research in the field. I focus on reviewing key concepts and terms related to mass murder, summarizing current information, and discussing potential motivations of mass murders, which includes examination of offender leakage and prior offense behavior, as well as social media activity. In the chapter, I distinguish between the different types of mass murderers and offender motives such as revenge, suicidal ideation, contagion/copycat, and fame seeking. In addition, in Chapter 2, I explore the role of the media in exacerbating the contagion/copycat effect, and the way members of society react to media. I also discuss firearms and the role they play in mass murder, particularly with regard to the fascination many perpetrators have with firearms, as well as the presence of firearms in many mass murderers' homes. Also included is a review of the literature on mass murder and mass murderers to provide background on the behavior and mindset of multiple mass murders of different backgrounds.

In Chapter 3, I provide a description of the role of the qualitative researcher in relation to the selection criteria; the sample population; reading, coding, analyzing, and verifying the data; and reporting the results of the data. I offer a review of researcher biases and ethical issues, as well my rationale for the number of cases for this research study, criteria for inclusion, and participant selection. I include a detailed review of the



method of data collection, as well as an outline of data coding and analysis procedures to answer the proposed research questions. Last, I discuss credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reliability.

In this study, I incorporated an examination of psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior of 12 American individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. I analyzed open-source data to determine psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior to identify common characteristics and behaviors among offenders. I gathered data and subsequently analyzed and coded each piece of data multiple times to ensure the highest possible levels of validity, reliability, and transferability relating to a qualitative study. Findings in this study were sufficient to answer both research questions relating to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior among offenders who made statements about their desire for fame and confirmed prior assumptions.

Chapter 5 concludes the study with a focus on the purpose and nature of the study and a discussion of the reasoning behind this research. I summarize the research as it relates to current literature on mass murder and mass murderers and how these findings add to that knowledge base. I end with examining limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research studies, and, last, provide a discussion of how this study affects social change initiatives.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The research on mass murderers has increased during the last few years, particularly after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school in 2012 (Lankford, 2016b; Meloy, 2015). Past researchers have focused on proposals for change largely aimed at gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014a), yet left out ways to profile offenders and examine risk factors. Past researchers of school shooters revealed elements such as suicidality, mental illness, or depression (Langman 2015b; Lankford, 2015b). Other researchers concluded mass murderers feel underappreciated or mistreated in areas such as work or school (Cullen, 2009; Langman, 2017c; Lankford, 2016b). More recently, researchers have posited mass murderers experienced delusions of grandeur that impaired rational decision-making. Thus, several fame-seeking mass murderers believed that obtaining higher body counts than their predecessors would lead to instant fame and notoriety, with many using the incident at Columbine High School as a blueprint (Langman, 2016c; Lankford, 2016b). What often remained unknown is the shooter's motive, as well as a way to predict the mindset of mass murderers before they commit their rampage killing (Eskey et al., 2015).

It is has become evident that mass murderers seek fame, even if it means committing a heinous crime to gain notoriety (Lankford, 2016b; Murray, 2017; Rokach, 2017). Researchers acknowledge the need for studies regarding mass murder prevention (Rokach, 2017), as well as the concept of fame and how mass murderers may find ways to become innovative in achieving fame as technology advances (Lankford, 2016b).

Lankford suggested that with the growth and innovation of technology, the frequency of mass murder also increases. More notable differences are variations in the way some mass murderers operate when compared with other mass murderers, particularly those who seek fame; however, this phenomenon had yet undergo vigorous study (Lankford, 2016b).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature review search strategy involved gaining access to multiple scholarly databases, Internet search engines, websites, and online bookstores. The most recurrently used databases were Research Gate, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PsycEXTRA, SAGE Journals, LexisNexis Academic, Academic Search Complete, and ScienceDirect. The most frequented search engine was Google Scholar. I also used Walden University's online library service to find exact articles. This service allows the researcher to search by title, journal, or by digital object identifier (DOI). Keyword searches include various forms of the root terms and some variations of *mass murder*, *mass murderer*, *mass shooting*, *public mass shooting*, *public mass murder*, *school shooting*, *rampage shooting*, *mass homicide*, *mass murder risk factors*, *mass murderer family dynamics*, *fame-seeking mass murderers*, *fame-seeking rampage murders*, *copycat mass murder*, *Columbine High School shooting*, *bullying and mass murder*, *active shooter events*, *Columbine effect*, *mass murder deaths by firearms*, *guns*, *firearms*, *mass murder myths*, *mass murder and the media*, *psychosocial characteristics of mass murderers*, *risk factors of mass murderers*, and *no notoriety campaign* (see Appendix A for a complete list of search terms). This intensive search consisted of examining data from studies published between

1999 to the present. Research prior to 1999 served to provide foundational knowledge as well supplemental information for the theoretical framework.

### **Conceptual Framework**

My main assumption for this study was that mass murderer profiling is possible based on psychosocial characteristics, behavior (specifically observational learning), and fame-seeking behaviors leading up to an offense. In addition, I surmised that fame-seeking mass murderers and those who attempt mass murder share similar characteristics. As mentioned, insufficient evidence supported the reasons mass murderers, particularly those seeking fame, commit murder, or can explain their emotional state at the time of the crime (Eskey et al., 2015).

The assumption was that leakage behavior had a correlation to fame-seeking mass murderers, or those who seek fame through killing and occasionally experience delusions of grandeur. Variables examined included psychosocial characteristics—more specifically, psychological traits and mental illness, and personality traits—family life and birth order, psycholinguistic writing as it relates to leakage behavior, as well as social media activity relating to leakage behavior (Lankford, 2016b).

### **Psychosocial Characteristics**

#### **Subtypes of Psychopathy**

Several researchers have attempted to use personality theories to justify deviant behavior. Millon and Davis (1996) came up with 10 subtypes of psychopathy they believed provided comprehensive explanations for criminal behavior and deviance. A select few mass murderers identify with the typologies listed by Millon and Davis.

Following is a discussion of psychopathy subtypes found most commonly with mass murderers.

The first typology Millon and Davis (1996) identified, the unprincipled psychopath often has a narcissistic personality type. Such individuals are adept at keeping their activities from breaking laws and do not tend to enter into mental health programs or clinical treatment. Unprincipled psychopaths enjoy exploiting others and do not care about the safety or well-being of others.

The next typology identified by Millon and Davis (1996) is the disingenuous psychopath. Individuals with these characteristics will come off as friendly and sociable. They will be adept at impression management; however, they will also be impulsive and temperamental (Langman, 2014). This individual will also have many relationships that lack depth (Millon & Davis, 1996). After the Columbine shooting, many people, including his teachers, described Eric Harris as being a pleasure to be around. His teachers and some classmates were horrified and shocked that someone like him could be a murderer (Langman, 2013; 2014).

Millon and Davis (1996) described abrasive psychopaths as those who struggle with answering to other people and following direction, expressing their own frustrations in a passive-aggressive manner. These individuals often pick fights with everyone they come into contact with, and will do so deliberately. When abrasive psychopaths experience struggle or setback, they will often exaggerate misfortunes to appear as if they are the victim. Millon and Davis highlighted that these individuals will most likely have symptoms and features commonly associated with paranoid personality disorder.

Malevolent psychopaths are hateful and distrusting, believing others will inevitably let them down or deceive them. This individual has no guilt and often displays evidence of sadism and paranoid personality disorder, possibly both. Malevolent psychopaths understand guilt, although they will not experience or display it (Millon & Davis, 1996). Individuals with these characteristics will also tend to be unremitting and will not give in when it comes to standing their ground (Millon & Davis, 1996).

Millon and Davis (1996) termed the last subtype of psychopaths the malignant psychopath, often is found among paranoid personality types. Features of this subtype include distrust, bitterness, jealousy, and the need for absolute power. The malignant psychopath often acts through fantasy rather than action, remaining isolated and ruminating over violent action and ways to seek vengeance. They are often paranoid in nature, will feel persecuted, and typically experience delusions of grandeur. As Millon and Davis noted, one of these psychopath's greatest fears is having to listen to authority; hence, the researchers concluded that many mass murderers fit into this subtype, ruminating about violence before deciding to take action.

Eric Harris clearly fit the malignant subtype. In his journal, he often discussed his wishes to hurt people before the Columbine incident (Langman, 2014). He wrote, "I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office [JCSO], 1999, p. 26). He often expressed violent and aggressive comments in his journal and had a nihilistic nature toward humankind.

## **Social Learning Theory**

Bandura provided the foundational theory of human behavior with social learning theory, stating that humans learn by watching others (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The basis of social learning theory is that individuals learn new behavior patterns through observation of behavior by others. Applying this to rampage shootings, many mass murderers model behavior after previous mass shooters (Langman, 2017b), a concept termed the contagion effect (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017). Mass murderers often mimic prior killers, and may go so far as to change their names on social media to match those of the previous perpetrators. A Columbine copycat event occurred in Russia on September 5, 2017, where the individual changed his name to Klebold on social media, after Dylan Klebold of the Columbine High School shooting (Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017). From 1999 to 2014, ABC News looked into copycat plots and attacks tied to Columbine. Levine (2014) found 36 attempted plots and 17 attacks. These incidents are known incidents and only include Columbine.

Langman (2017b) included various other perpetrators and their role models as influences. For example, influences can include music, movies, people, and books. Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho took inspiration from Columbine, as did Finland school shooter Pekka-Eric Auvinen. Other mass murderers take influence from historical figures such as Adolf Hitler or musicians such as Marilyn Manson (Langman, 2017b). Some mass murderers have goals of outdoing other mass murders. Jared Lee Loughner, who shot Senator Gabrielle Giffords in 2011, stated he wanted to fire 165 rounds in 1 minute and aspired to be on national television (Lankford, 2016b).

## **Family Dynamics**

Family involvement and family dynamics of mass murderers have shown to vary. However, researchers have shown conflicts and a lack of discipline within the family system is common among many mass murderers (Langman, 2016a). Gonzalez-Guarda, Dowdell, Marino, Anderson, and Laughon (2018) discussed the role of family dynamics in mass murders, particularly mass shootings. Gonzalez-Guarda et al. identified several factors associated with mass shootings, including intimate partner violence, toxic stress, bullying, and mental health. Gonzalez-Guarda et al. identified intimate partner violence as a factor in mass shootings, something confirmed by Everytown for Gun Safety (2017), which found partner violence in approximately 54% of mass shootings from 2009 to 2016. Gonzalez-Guarda et al. also cited adverse childhood experiences such as neglect, the death of a parent or caregiver, family dysfunction, and parental alcohol abuse as toxic stressors serving as risk factors of violence. Bullying, although often disputed, appears to be another risk factor stemming from many other factors (Mears et al., 2017).

Langman (2016d) found many of the identified traumatized shooters experienced domestic violence or broken marriages of some form in their homes. Some shooters who experienced home trauma included Charles Whitman, Evan Ramsey, Mitchell Johnson, and Alvaro Castillo. Charles Whitman's father physically abused his wife and children. Evan Ramsey's entire family was dysfunctional including his father who was in prison. A child of divorce, Mitchell Johnson had a family with rampant abuse and drug use. Last, Alvaro Castillo's mother and seven of nine siblings had some form of mental illness.



Castillo's father also abused and possibly even molested his son. These are only a few examples of known cases of abuse and violence of dysfunctional families.

Kerr (2000) explained Bowen's family systems theory and the perception of the family as an emotional unit with complex thoughts. Even though some individuals may feel detached or emotionally disconnected from their family, Bowen felt such disconnect was not true. People vie for the attention of their family member by seeking approval and validation. Whether family members are aware of doing so, they are responding to each member's needs, failures, and setbacks (Kerr, 2000). This connection, though unknown to some members, makes the family symbiotic. Family systems will vary in terms of connection and symbiosis (Kerr, 2000). Anxiety can create tension among family members, leading one family member to take on more responsibility than others (Kerr, 2000). The family member who takes on too much anxiety from other family members is more vulnerable to negative coping mechanisms and mental health issues. These individuals are also more at risk of difficulties such as depression, alcoholism, and physical issues (Kerr, 2000).

In family theory, Sulloway (1996) surmised that birth order plays a role in shaping personality. Sulloway theorized that firstborn children are the most aggressive, ambitious, and conservative among siblings. This role plays a factor specifically when siblings vie for parental attention and resources. Such behaviors manifest as an "alpha male" personality type. When an older sister and younger pair are involved, the alpha male personality type is more likely to appear among males and is less common among older brothers and younger sister pairs (Sulloway, 1996). Sibling birth order may also

influence risk-taking behavior, with later-born siblings often partaking in more risk-taking behaviors than their older siblings (Okudaira, Kinari, Mizutani, Ohtake, & Kawaguchi, 2015; Sulloway, 1996). Okudaira et al. noted that different-sex siblings were often more competitive than female same-sex pairs of high school age. However, according to official statistics, siblicide is more common among same-sex siblings.

### **Key Terms and Concepts**

#### **Definition of Mass Murder**

One of the main reasons mass murder has been difficult to research is the ambiguous nature of the definition. Madfis (2014) identified mass murder as the murder of three or more victims in one episode at one location or a closely related location. Fox and Levin (1998) defined mass murder as the killing of at least four individuals. The FBI also defined mass murder as killing four or more victims (2005/2008). Others have argued for a victim count of three or more (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglass, 1988). Dietz (1986) felt the requirements for a mass murder should be a single incident comprised of multiple victims within a 24-hour period. Dietz also stated that mass murder involved the willful injury of five or more victims, and the killing of at least three victims by a single perpetrator.

Coming to an agreement about the definition of mass murder has been an ongoing debate for decades. In 2005 and 2008, the FBI required a minimum of four deaths in a single incident to qualify as a mass murder, with no additional injuries needed. Following the Columbine incident in 1999, when mass shootings began to undergo extensive examination, Larkin (2009) described the events as random and involving multiple

parties. The attacks can be on entire institutions, schools, communities, or whatever target the perpetrator has chosen. As time has passed, various researchers (Hickey 2016; Lankford, 2016a) have continued to use the FBI's (2005/2008) definition of four or more deaths, despite the Violent Crimes Act (2013) reducing the number of victims from four to three. This ambiguity of the definition of mass murder has caused inconsistencies in statistics about mass murder.

### **School Shootings**

A school shooting is a mass shooting involving the killing of three or more people on the property of a school or institute of higher education (Bondü & Beier, 2015). In one of the first attempts to profile a school shooter, Mary Ellen O'Toole made the distinction that that no clear-cut profile of a school shooter existed; instead, one can use risk factors and assess threats to aid in the process. Important to take into account is that just because individuals possess these risk factors and make these threats, they are not always in danger of committing a school shooting (Langman, 2017c; O'Toole, 2009).

After the Columbine High School shooting, the FBI pushed to have every school establish threat assessment procedures in an effort led by 160 officials, including educators, law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, and prosecutors (O'Toole, 2009). Since then, the effort to establish a safe environment for children has yet to receive comprehensive attention. Although my focus in this study was mass murder, the majority of fame-seeking subjects in this study specifically committed a school shooting.

## **Mass Murderers**

**Myths.** The myths regarding mass murder made it difficult to research the subject. Some of these myths include gothism, violent video games, bullying, media, and the idea that mass murderers snap. In discussing the myth of mass murderers “snapping,” Meloy (2014) noted there is no such term in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed; American Psychiatric Association, 2013); however the media widely uses this term to induce panic among the public. Planning a mass murder attack can occur weeks, months, or even years in advance (Fox & DeLateur, 2014b; Madfis, 2017; Meloy, 2014). Some perpetrators will make lists of individuals they wish to kill or not kill. Perpetrators begin stockpiling weapons, ammunition, and body armor in preparation for their killing spree. If individuals plan on committing suicide, they will often also write their suicide note and occasionally write a manifesto, often described as a type of leakage behavior (Meloy, 2014).

**Profiling.** When attempting to profile mass murderers, individuals often imply such can effortlessly fall into categories (Meloy, 2014). Cullen (2004) categorized mass murderers into *psychopaths*, *psychotics*, and *depressives*. Langman (2009, 2014) used the terms *traumatized*,” *psychotic*, and *psychopathic* to describe school shooters, whom he sorted into categories based on common traits. Cullen distinguished *psychopath* as an often-misused term the media often is quick to use as a label. True psychopaths do not always have to be out of touch with reality and do not necessarily display psychotic features. Psychopaths make a choice to behave in a particular way. A careful distinction Langman (2014) stressed about profiling is that, although categories are useful for

identifying risk factors, it must be taken into consideration that most individuals with such characteristics (i.e., traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic) would never commit crime, or even murder.

**Psychological state.** Another argument brought up when discussing mass murder revolves around the mental health of the perpetrator. Generally, everyone tries to determine what frame of mind could have driven the perpetrator to commit such a heinous and violent act. Many want to know if the individual was suffering from a mental illness and taking psychotropic medication. Furthermore, the public wants to know if the perpetrator suffered from delusions of grandeur, had hallucinations, or experienced a psychotic break and, if so, would have been capable of planning an attack weeks, perhaps even months, in advance. Meloy (2014) stated several adult mass murderers and even fewer adolescent mass murderers are psychotic. Researchers and writers, such as Langman (2014; 2013, 2015) and Cullen (2009) have discussed typologies, such as the psychotic typology in their work.

Commonly accepted as having symptoms of mental illness, psychotic shooters may have received formally diagnosis of a disorder such as paranoid schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder. These individuals also often experience delusions of grandeur and hallucinations, and are typically highly socially impaired and isolated (Langman, 2013). In examining 10 rampage shooters, Langman (2019) found five deemed to be psychotic, falling on the schizophrenia spectrum.

Mass murderers often come from stable homes with no known history of abuse. For his study, Langman (2019) used Michael Carneal (age 14), Kip Kinkel (age 15),

Andrew Wurst (age 14), Dylan Klebold (age 17), and Seung Hui Cho (age 23). Carneal experienced delusions prior to committing his rampage, revealing in a letter to a friend that he was hearing voices. Carneal exhibited such odd behavior in the classroom that it kept him alienated from his classmates. After his trial, he received a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia (Langman, 2015b). The Jonesboro mass murderers influenced Kip Kinkel, a school shooter who murdered four, with those killings having occurred two months prior to his rampage. Kinkel claimed to have had a better plan than his predecessors; in addition, the teen heard voices in his head. When Kinkel displayed leakage behavior to his friends, even giving a report in school about making bombs, no one took his threats seriously (Langman, 2015b). Known for saying strange things, Andrew Wurst suffered from auditory hallucinations. His role models were individuals including Napoleon and Hitler, and perhaps also the Jonesboro mass murders. Dylan Klebold had social anxiety and possible avoidant personality disorder, and typically with these personality traits, schizotypal personality disorder often emerges. People often described him as “odd, goofy, or weird” (Langman, 2015b). Evidence that Klebold and his coconspirator, Eric Harris, planned their massacre almost a year before the attack appeared in Eric Harris’s journal writings (Cullen, 2009).

Seung-Hui Cho, known for the Virginia Tech mass shooting, is known to have been a loner (Langman, 2015a). Teachers asked Cho to leave the classroom on multiple occasions for disturbing behavior, some of which included violent writing stories and poems. He was paranoid and experienced grandiose delusions, with speculation that he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia (Langman, 2015a). Classmates recalled him

introducing himself as “Question Mark.” He had a confrontation with a Virginia Tech professor at Virginia Tech who was upset with a story he wrote about a student who committed a school shooting. Of the 10 mass murderers Langman (2015b) studied, all were deeply psychologically troubled and most of them suicidal—many so troubled that family members and sometimes peers often noticed these behaviors. Despite each individual’s deep-rooted psychological issues, which could include paranoia, delusions of grandeur, auditory or visual hallucinations, and sometimes extreme social isolation, each was able to research and carefully plan and coordinate a rampage attack.

**Substance use.** Violence and substance abuse typically go hand and hand. Meloy (2014) stated that, in the case of spousal homicide, the victim or the perpetrator or both are usually under the influence of alcohol, something that is the opposite for mass murderers. During the time of the rampage, many mass murderers eschew mind-altering substances because they do not want their judgment impaired: Drugs could possibly interfere with planning and preparation. Langman (2016b) examined the role of psychiatric medications in school shootings. Psychiatric medication use has increased since the 1980s; psychostimulants in particular, such as Ritalin, has quadrupled and antidepressant use increased 75% from the late 1990s to the early 2000s (Langman, 2016c). Despite this increase in medication use, violent crime has decreased (Langman, 2016b).

## **Preoffense Behavior**

### **Predicting Mass Murder**

Contrary to popular belief and despite all the data gathered on mass murder, it is not possible to predict mass murder (Meloy, 2014). The best scholars can do is use existing data to compile risk factors, or as in the case of some industries, use insurance company statistics, called actuarial data, to predict crime. These statistics are based on variables such as gender (with male crime being more prevalent), substance abuse, paranoia, hostility, difficulty controlling anger, and preoccupation with weapons (O'Brien, 2013). These data are lacking in the ability to provide informative and substantive data when examining the psyche of a mass murderer.

Meloy, Hoffman, Roshdi, and Guldiman (2014) noted that risk factors and variables often used for predicting mass murder contain dynamic variables, not static ones. Dynamic variables typically contain more useful information; however, their identification must occur within a smaller time frame. One dynamic variable is pathway warning behavior (Meloy et al., 2014), which involves the planning, research, and preparation portion leading up to a mass murder. Another dynamic behavior, fixated warning behavior, involves the potential perpetrator becoming increasingly psychologically fascinated and preoccupied with another individual (perhaps a role model) or cause (Meloy et al., 2014). Meloy et al. found that within these behaviors are specific, more discrete behaviors that can be risk factors for targeted violence. Langman (2017c) stated that when studying (school) shootings, influence does not equal causation. In other words, knowing about a school shooter does mean that individual will become a



school shooter, and the same goes for a mass murderer. Examining factors that can put an individual at risk of may prove beneficial.

### **Motives**

A common argument among those studying mass murder is the motive of the offender. This can be difficult to study, since the rate of suicide in mass murder is around 50% (Hickey, 2016), with the event often ending in suicide by cop (Lankford, 2016c). Researchers have seemed to find commonalities showing that public mass shooters plan their attacks in advance and are less likely to commit a crime of passion (Langman, 2014; Lankford, 2013). Auxemery (2015) identified complex reasons and motivations leading offenders to act out; in the United States, the main motivation for mass murder is professional revenge. Commonly, mass murderers are male with a 90% to 95% crime rate (Hickey, 2016), suffer from a loss of social support, have endured social isolation since childhood, experience bullying, have difficulty with long-term relationships, and display narcissistic, rigid, and often paranoid traits (Auxemery, 2015).

Fox and DeLateur (2014a) found yellow flags (low to moderate threat levels) common in the profiles of mass shooters, which they argued turn red (more threatening) after a violent event. Yellow flags included offender sex (95% male), race (66% white), and shared characteristics such as depression, resentment, social isolation, externalizing blame, fascination with violent media, and weapons. Unfortunately, although these factors seem like warning signs, they are not indicators until after a crime is committed. Wrongly using them to accuse an individual is potentially harmful and can result in false positives.

## **Classification of Motivations**

Over the years, many researchers have attempted to determine why mass murderers are motivated to kill (Auxemery, 2015; Eskey et al., 2015; Fox, Levin, & Fridel, 2018; Mullen 2003; Petee, Padgett, & York, 1997). Auxemery (2015) hypothesized that professional revenge is the most common motivation for mass murder. Mullen (2003) classified mass killings of several types, which included family killings, cult killings, and mass killings resulting from other criminal activity (Auxemery, 2015). In Auxemery's view, crime stems from three typologies of the victim-murderer relationship: victim-specific, such as family members or work colleagues; unknown victims (instrumental); or random victims. Petee et al. (1997) came up with a modern typology for mass murder in public locations that include anger and revenge as motivation for the following: specific personal targets who are known individuals, specific places with symbolic connections, diffuse targets, domestic/romantic targets, direct/interpersonal (crime of passion–type targets), felony-related, gang-motivated, politically motivated, and nonspecified (could be the result of delusional thoughts and/ or pathology).

## **Bullying**

Bullying has been a subject of debate since the Columbine High School incident. Böckler, Roth, Stetten, and Zick (2014) stated that approximately 88.1% of school shooters experienced social conflicts with bullying, 53.7% related being verbally mistreated, 29.9% faced romantic rejection; and 43% had a conflict with teachers or problems with authority (Böckler et al., 2014). While Böckler et al. did not find a direct

correlation between experiencing bullying and the variables of loneliness, hopelessness, and depression, they did identify these variables as common risk factors that would lead to unwanted behaviors. Examples of such behaviors could include externalized behavior through committing violence, elusive behaviors such as eating disorders, and internal behaviors such as auto aggression and suicide (Böckler et al. 2014). Madfis (2017) highlighted the concept that school rampages in particular do not occur in vain when it comes motive. When examining the rampage from a microsociological interpersonal level, factors such as negative peer influence, stress, and bullying can have an impact.

### **Mental Illness**

Though most mass murders do not have a clinically diagnosed mental disorder at the commission of the crime, 60% displayed a form of impairment (Follman, Aronsen, Pan, & Caldwell, 2015). Despite mental illness repeatedly linked with mass murder in the media (Fox & DeLateur, 2014b; Lankford, 2015; Lankford, 2016b; Towers et al., 2015), many mass murderers do not have serious mental illnesses (Fox & Fridel, 2016; Varshney, Mahapatra, Krishnan, Gupta, & Deb, 2016). Because three recently highly publicized cases of mass murder involved mentally ill mass murderers, many have assumed that the place to start addressing mass murder is mental illness. Jared Lee Loughner, James Holmes, and Adam Lanza all underwent treatment for mental illness by a mental health professional at some point in their lives. Even so, the ambiguity of the term *mental illness* leaves many unanswered questions (Stone, 2015).

## **Pathways to Violence**

When trying to predict what makes a mass murderer resort to violence, many scholars and experts have speculated as to the pathways leading to such behavior (Langman, 2014; Madfis, 2017; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; Varshney et al., 2016). Madfis (2017) divided the pathways into individual, micro, and macro levels. On the individual level are common occurrences of depression and personality disorders found among offenders (Langman, 2014); however, Varshney et al. proposed a culmination of factors besides depression and personality disorders. Some of these factors could include a past history of violence, a previous arrest record or prior juvenile record, history of physical abuse, substance abuse, or perceived threats. Also possible are stressors such as a recent relationship strain, loss of job, or the experience of bullying or other type of personal victimization (Varshney et al., 2016). Langman (2016a) has also found evidence of coming from an unstable home, combined with other risk factors, as a factor commonly found among school shooters. Some unstable home environmental conditions could include having divorced parents; one or both parents being alcoholics; having a parent or parents in prison; and domestic violence, either among parents or between parent and child (Langman, 2016a). Other researchers have found marital/relationship issues can lead to boundary issues within a family system or unit (Okudaira et al., 2015).

Cohen et al. (2014) studied linguistic markers when examining warning behaviors specifically in social media. Specifically termed linguistic markers for radical violence, these warning behaviors encompass leakage, fixation, and identification, all easily found in an individual's social media postings. Researchers use these markers to help input data

into computer algorithms, which then enables recognizing signs of radical violence and terrorism (Cohen et al., 2014). Egnoto and Griffin (2016) examined legacy tokens, or suicide notes left by active shooters and those who committed suicide. Using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a computer program, the researchers wanted to generate support for automated linguistic analysis. Some areas of analysis were harm to self and harm to others. Using the program, Egnoto and Griffin identified suicidal ideation as based on the use of more self-references, future tense, and positive emotion. Overall, the researchers learned that spree killers focus on negative words relating to emotion and anger, while suicidal individuals tend to use many pronouns and write in the future tense. Egnoto and Griffin asserted these findings could be useful for in exploring psychological aspects relating to internal and external harm.

**Internet communication/social media usage.** While some attacks are publicized and more obvious, other offenders make their intentions known through the use of the Internet and social media. While conducting online activity, some individuals stumble upon fan communities, or social network sites, which connect people of similar interests. Oksanen, Hawdon, and Räsänen (2014) examined YouTube fan sites that glorified school shootings. Online communities on sites such as YouTube are without a physical location, allowing the gathering of individuals worldwide who share common goals and interests.

Leakage behavior statistics for mass murders and shootings range from 46% to nearly 70%, and even higher for school shootings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Cohen et al., 2014). With regard to school shootings, Langman (2012) found younger offenders left a longer trail of communications and behaviors than older

shooters. Less-obvious leakage behaviors include admiration and imitation, which occur when potential offenders find an individual after whom to emulate themselves. Such individual might say a comment such as “someone should do that at this school” (Langman, 2012b). Warnings are also a form of leakage behavior and may be subtler. A perpetrator may message a friend by phone or social media, telling the friend to stay home from school the next day without going into detail why. The perpetrator is providing a warning so the friend will not be at risk of death on the day of the attack.

**Leakage.** Mass murderers communicate their intentions before their preplanned attack, communications known as leakage, *pre-event indicators*, and *warning behaviors* (James et al., 2007, 2008; Silver et al., 2017). Leakage frequently occurs before events such as school shootings and active shooter incidents, targeted attacks or rampage shootings, and assassination attempts or attacks (Cohen, et al., 2014).

Mary Ellen O’Toole (2009) coined the term *leakage* in her study of school shooters. O’Toole used a four-pronged model to examine the student’s personality, family dynamics, academic dynamics and the student’s role, and social dynamics. In doing so, O’Toole discovered leakage behavior, which she grouped under personality traits and behavior. She described leakage as occurring when individuals reveal clues to their feelings, ideas, attitudes, intentions, and even fantasies, either intentionally or unintentionally. These clues can be subtle or more obvious, direct threats spoken, written, or portrayed in artwork (O’Toole, 2009).

Meloy and O’Toole (2011) later reexamined leakage due to a lack of operationalization of the definition and came up with eight behaviors related to leakage.

These behaviors were pathway warning behavior, fixation warning behavior, identification warning behavior, novel aggression warning behavior, energy burst warning behavior, leakage warning behavior, directly communicated threat warning behavior, and last resort warning behavior (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011). Pathway warning behavior refers to activities that occur before an attack, such as researching or planning. Fixation warning behavior occurs when an individual is preoccupied with a person or idea. Identification warning behavior refers to an individual's desire to be a pseudocommando, having a fascination with guns or weapons or a warriorlike mentality (Dietz, 1986; Meloy & O'Toole, 2011; Silver et al., 2017). Novel aggression occurs through acts of violence unrelated to the actual event, with energy burst warning behavior emerging through an increase in the rate of activity relating to the incident. Leakage, communication to a third party about the impending attack, differs from communicated threat warning behavior, which is communication to police or law enforcement. An increasing desperation through the perpetrator's spoken words or actions represents last warning behavior (Silver et al., 2017).

**Psycholinguistic analysis.** The first use of the term *psycholinguistic analysis* was by Kantor (1936) in *An Objective Psychology of Grammar*. In the book, he discussed the relationship between psychology and linguistics, describing objective psychology in relation to grammar in later chapters. Kantor also addressed grammar organized by semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology. Dixon (1997) referenced basic linguistic theory to explain the process of analyzing the use of words and their meaning. Later, Hörmann (1971) attempted to determine psychological meaning behind words used by

individuals. Psycholinguistics is helpful with regard to mass murderers, because it is not uncommon for mass murders and school shooters to leave manifestos or suicide notes at the crime scene (White, 2017).

Many mass murderers express their thoughts, particularly those involving suicide, in journals, manifestos, videos, and other forms of communication (Eskey et al., 2015; Lankford, 2015, 2016a; Madfis, 2014). Lankford (2013) found suicide notes in about 50% of the school shooter population and 56% of the rampage shooters he studied, with acts ranging from 1990 to 2010. Also important for the purposes of this study, Lankford (2016b) stated that suicide notes, also known as “legacy tokens,” by the FBI, may be of significance, because offenders leaving them behind could be fame seeking. Along these lines was a notable communication written by mass murder Elliot Rodger (White, 2017). Rodger additionally released YouTube videos chronicling his life. In his manifesto, Rodger stated, “I had to act weird in order to gain attention. I was tired of being the invisible shy kid. Infamy is better than total obscurity. . . . I never knew how to gain positive attention, only negative” (Rodger, n.d., p. 42).

Scholars have used psycholinguistics in attempts to gain insight into an individual’s personality and mindset. Golbeck (2016) examined differences between narcissistic and nonnarcissistic individuals in a sample of 1,000 Twitter users. Golbeck (2016) researched the application of language in relation to narcissism, something relevant to mass murderers and personality, because many mass murderers have traits of narcissism and personality disorders (Auxemery, 2015; Kauten et al., 2015; Langman, 2014; Verlinden et al., 2000). Analyzing social media was important to Golbeck, as users



intend their posts for a public audience. Golbeck hypothesized a correlation between narcissism and negative affect. He also noted as a link between antisocial behavior and the need to draw personal focus, and how it would lead to narcissistic individuals involving themselves with social interactions. Overall, Golbeck found that subjects who rated high for narcissism were more likely to use profanity, negative emotional words, words relating to anger, and antisocial language. Furthermore, when individuals used attention-seeking language, even negative language such as bragging, they received attention in the form of “likes” or retweets (Golbeck, 2016).

**Risk assessment.** Risk assessment and threat assessment often overlap in the criminal world. Risk assessment in relation to violence has been around longer than threat assessment, and both rely on the judgment of professionally trained individuals (Reid Meloy et al., 2012). When determining risk factors, professors generally sort people into groups of high, medium, or low. Certain risk factors may remain the same, or static, whereas other risk factors may change (dynamic). Examples of factors that remain unchanging are gender (for the most part) and previous problems with the law, particularly those involving violence. Risk factors that can change include weapons possessions and substance use (Meloy et al., 2012).

### **Social Change**

Supporting the idea that incidents of mass murders are on the rise is the increase in physical response, including placing metal detectors in schools, having student identification cards, and enforcing zero-tolerance policies (Schildkraut et al., 2015). After the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, as well as the mass murder at an

Aurora, Colorado, movie theater, many advocated for policy changes and gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014a). Desired changes included enacting stricter gun control, offering more mental health services, hardening security in public areas, and possibly monitoring violent entertainment. Fox and DeLateur (2014a) also discussed the myth of the rise of mass shootings. One explanation for these possible myths includes mental health cases, particularly schizophrenia, going untreated (Brooks, 2012); another is the expiration of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban in 1994 (Fox & DeLateur, 2014a).

*Mother Jones* has examined mass murder incidents from 1982 through 2012, claiming a surge in fatalities, including a record number in the year 2012 (Follman, Pan, & Aronsen, 2013).

### **Conspiracy Theories**

After mass murder incidents, particularly following the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, individuals believe the incident never occurred or the government staged the event, with the grieving people portrayed on the news played by “crisis actors” (Chavez, 2018). Results from a poll conducted by Farleigh Dickinson University were that at least 25% of Americans believe the government is hiding facts about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Cassino & Jenkins, 2013).

### **Duty to Warn**

The 1969 case *Tarasoff v. Regents of University of California* involved Prosenjit Poddar, who told school psychologist Dr. Lawrence Moore about his intentions to kill Tatiana Tarasoff, a fellow student at the University of California at Berkeley. Poddar shot

and stabbed Tarasoff, for which he went to prison; following release, he returned to India, where is now married. Tarasoff's parents sued the University for the psychologist's failure to inform them or their daughter of the threat. The California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Tarasoff family, finding the duty to warn an individual or society of an individual's threat to do harm took precedence over maintaining client confidentiality (*Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*, 1974, 1976).

This ruling has brought much debate within the psychological and psychiatric community over the decades (Stone, 1976). Aurora theater shooter James Holmes killed 12 and wounded 58, having first mailed a notebook to his psychiatrist outlining his intentions. (The notebook was sitting in a mailroom, unopened, at the time of the attack.) The question remains whether he disclosed his intentions to her prior to the incident and if duty to warn applied in this situation (Ramsland, 2013). This is significant due to the fact that 46% to nearly 70% of mass murderers brag to someone about an impending event or plans of intended violence, a statistic that is even higher for school shootings (Silver et al., 2017).

## **Firearms**

According to Lankford (2016a), firearms in a public setting facilitate approximately 15% of mass murders. The rest of mass murders are familial homicide, which are comprised of murder committed with other crimes, such as robbery and/or burglary, or as the result of gang violence or drug activity (Lankford, 2016a). The United States, though only making up five percent of the world population, accounts for 31% of the world's public mass shootings (Hamlett, 2017; Lankford, 2016a). In the past decade,

approximately 240 mass killings have occurred, three quarters of which have involved a firearm (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Hamlett, 2017).

The types of firearms most often used in mass shootings are semiautomatic handguns and semiautomatic rifles, with rifles being the most common (Hamlett, 2017; Lankford, 2016b ). While it is difficult to argue whether banning assault rifles will reduce the number of mass murder incidents, Meloy (2014) suggested an assault weapons ban on magazine capacity can reduce the number of deaths when an incident does occur. An example is the case of Jared Loughner and his attack on Gabrielle Giffords. Three men were able to tackle Loughner as he was attempting to reload his weapon. Firearms are often the center of a debate when it comes to a mass murder, but researchers have shown a present absence of substantial solutions.

Lankford (2016b) suggested the very nature of mass shootings is enough to terrify the public into hysteria. Mass shootings are violent acts, target seemingly random victims, and occur in often public locations (Lankford, 2016b). Reinforcing the viewpoints of the public set forth by Schildkraut et al. (2015) with regard to moral panic, Silva and Capellan (2018) argued that the media provided the public with information leading to perception about public mass shootings, specifically that they can occur wherever, whenever, and to whomever.

Silvia and Capellan (2018) discussed several other factors leading the media to influence moral panic, such as reporting largely crime-related incidents, catering to the public's fascination with violence, and overreporting homicide. Crimes with a large number of deaths and injuries tend to gain a disproportionate amount of news attention,

as well (Duwe, 2000; Silvia & Capellan, 2018). Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak (2009) also found incidents involving firearms highly publicized, as were crimes perpetrated by juveniles (ages 17 to 24 years). In addition, crimes involving assault weapons generally receive more coverage by media (Duwe, 2004). Silvia and Capellan identified mass murder as obtaining more media coverage than other forms of homicide and other types of crime, such as property crime, which occurs at a higher rate. From all the given information about moral panic, it is obvious that violence attracts attention, often negative attention.

### **Moral Panic**

An additional myth that has gained public scrutiny and debate is that the occurrences of mass murders are increasing (Meloy, 2014). Meloy identified the tendency to overestimate the occurrence of an incident in our minds by its significance as availability bias. Meloy placed the occurrence of mass murders at around 20 to 25 per year since 1976, with 2003 being the worst year for mass murder. Other researchers have stated conflicting arguments about the numbers of mass murder. Schildkraut et al. (2015) discussed the origins of moral panic, which refers to the public reacting to a real or perceived threat. Situations linked to moral panic include muggings, drugs, juvenile crime, gangs, and terrorism (Schildkraut et al., 2015).

Schildkraut et al. (2015) recognized five elements present in moral panic: “concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility” (p. 91). One reason for society’s adaptation of the belief of moral panic is the series of school shootings in the 1990s, culminating in the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, still the watershed

event against which measurement of other school shootings takes place. Prior to the Columbine era, fear of being targeted by crime appeared largely relegated to urban areas, particularly inner cities. After Columbine, many believed they were no longer safe in their suburban communities, where before, middle-class and upper-class citizens viewed their suburban and rural communities as safe havens. Shootings in the late 1990s shattered this belief of safety in suburban and rural communities (Schildkraut et al., 2015).

### **Fame**

The growing popularity of social media shows that some individuals are more concerned with self-image and fame than others. A desire for lasting fame may be of utmost importance to a small percentage of social media users, even if that means murdering innocent people to achieve that fame (or infamy; Lankford, 2106b; Madfis, 2017). One of the first cases of a mass murderer killing for attention was Robert B. Smith who, on, November 12, 1966, murdered five people at a beauty school, claiming he wanted to make a name for himself. The shooting occurred shortly after that committed by Charles Whitman atop the University of Texas at Austin clock tower (Langman, 2016e).

The obsession of wanting to go from being unknown to have one's name all over the news extends further. Some individuals will even go as far as imitating and copying other mass murderers in behavior and sometimes appearance. Disturbed individuals continue to imitate the Columbine shooters two decades after the incident, naming weapons after Klebold's and Harris's weapons, using Internet handles inspired by the

perpetrators, calling the two males martyrs, and even making pilgrimages to Columbine High School itself (Langman, 2018a).

Rui and Stefanone (2016) addressed the social media phenomenon of how the Internet enables people to achieve fame. This is largely due to the fact that people can exaggerate physical attributes, such as beauty and intelligence. Individuals have the ability to alter photos and ensure they are only showing their audience the best versions of themselves (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). This communication practice is not limited an individual's immediate location, but can reach individuals all over the world in a matter of seconds.

Social media is a means of connecting people. It is also a way of creating “micro-celebrities” or “Instafamous” people: individuals who are famous for doing things only related to the Internet (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). In the United States, about 80% of high school students believe they will have a job that pays well by the age of 25, and approximately one quarter think they will achieve fame soon (Lankford, 2016a; Twenge, 2014).

### **Media Response**

The media has embellished, dramatized, and sensationalized mass murder using emotionally charged content (Hamlett, 2017). Mass murder incidents are particularly upsetting to the general public because of their violent and seemingly random nature, and because they can occur in public places, giving the impression that no one is safe (Lankford, 2016b; Silva & Capellan, 2018). As a result, the public begins to panic and, in an attempt to gather information, turns to the media to as a main source. The media tend

to give more attention to some mass murders, particularly mass shootings, than other mass murders.

When Columbine occurred, it was the third most-televised and -watched event of the decade, following only the 1996 crash of TWA flight 800 off the coast of New York and the Rodney King riots following an act of police brutality (Mears et al., 2017). People begin to think they will fall victim to these events, even though the chances of occurrence are relatively low. This is, however, not meant to diminish the seriousness of these events (Schildkraut et al., 2018). The media will continuously report the crimes for hours, days, and even weeks, often without giving thought to the consequences of how the reporting will shape topics such mental health and gun reform (Schildkraut et al., 2018). Furthermore, the media often do not consider other consequences such as the contagion effect, also known as the copycat effect.

Copycat crime is an act of crime influenced by a previous crime. One of the earliest known instances of this phenomenon dates back to 1774 in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which the main character commits suicide by gunshot to the head. After the publication of the novel, suicide rates increased. Although it was hard to find a direct correlation, individuals called these subsequent suicides the "Werther effect" (Phillips, 1974). Publicizing suicide, especially in the mainstream media, leads to an increase in suicide rates. When Marilyn Monroe committed suicide, acts of suicide in the United States increased by approximately 12% (Phillips, 1974; Schaffer, 2018).



When it comes to mass murder, the Werther effect appears equally applicable. Towers et al. (2015) found the contagion effect lasts approximately 13 days after a mass shooting incident. The Columbine shooters bragged about the number of deaths they were going to achieve, and subsequently, other mass murders have attempted to kill more than the Columbine shooters. Some still admire the Columbine shooters and view them as martyrs two decades after the occurrence (Langman, 2017b).

### **Societal Influence**

Schildkraut et al. (2018) believed the images presented to the general public, especially those that are extremely psychologically unhealthy, can trigger individuals into violent behavior, especially those already planning a crime. Various factors also merit consideration, such as biological development, mental state, cognitive deficiencies, social failures/isolation, substance use/abuse, family dysfunction, and predisposition to violence (Schildkraut et al., 2018). Taking into account all these factors, organizations such as No Notoriety, started by Tim and Caren Teves, who lost their son in the Aurora theater shooting, argued that society and mainstream media should refrain from publishing the faces of individuals who commit mass murder, instead focusing on the victims. Lankford and Madfis (2018) made a similar proposal as the Teves family, suggesting the media should refrain from naming the perpetrator, showing photos of the perpetrator and previous perpetrators, and reporting everything else in detail (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). The hope with this proposal is to refrain from giving these individuals the fame they desire and reduce the copycat/contagion effect.

## **Risk Assessment and Prevention**

### **Threat Assessment**

Individuals may collectively utilize several methods as means of threat assessment. The origins of threat assessment date back to Lombroso and Laschi (1892), who wrote of crime in relation to the law and attempted to determine motivating factors. Since Lombroso and Laschi's work, threat assessment has evolved into taking into account how targeted violence moved from political violence and terrorism to also include workplace violence, campus and college violence, school shootings, attacks on public figures, and youth and adult mass murder, the result of which have been active shooter and threat assessment protocols (Meloy et al., 2012). Determining how likely an incident is to occur is to perform a threat assessment (Meloy et al., 2012).

### **Warning Signs**

Individuals who commit violence often show warning behaviors, which manifest in different ways (Meloy, 2016). Researchers have shown around half to more than half of adolescent and some adult mass murderers exhibit leakage behavior in some form (Capellan, & Gomez, 2018; Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014; Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2012; O'Toole, 2009; Silver et al., 2017).

### **Selection of Individuals Who Completed or Attempted Mass Murder**

With this study, I provided insight into 12 individuals who completed or attempted mass murder attacks, analyzing their psychological and social characteristics, family dynamics, and social media. I took into consideration ages, locations, as well as number of victims, exercising careful deliberation with regard to victims injured versus

killed, because not members of this sample completed a mass murder, according to the FBI (2005/2008) definition. However, all the individuals chosen for this sample had the intention of completing a mass murder.

### **Summary and Transition**

The research on mass murder has continued to expand over the last decade, with the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School serving as a cause for reexamination (Lankford, 2016b; Meloy, 2015). What is known centers largely on gun control and the proposal for change relating to safety in U.S. schools due to increasing moral panic and the fear instilled by mainstream media (Auxemery, 2015; Fox & DeLateur, 2014b; Meloy, 2014; Schildkraut et al., 2018). However, there has been little focus concerning prevention (Rokach, 2017). Debates still arise about the causes of mass murder. Some researchers of school shooters showed bullying and isolation to be causes of concern; however, that may not be so true (Böckler et al., 2014). Deeper issues relating to feelings of underappreciation and mistreatment have emerged (Cullen, 2009; Langman 2017; Lankford, 2015).

Researchers have also found family dysfunction is not uncommon among mass murders (Langman, 2016a), with many mass murderers facing domestic violence as a normal part of family life (Langman, 2016e). Knowing that mass murderers generally do not snap is also important to take into consideration (Fox & DeLateur, 2014b; Madfis, 2017; Meloy, 2014). However, despite awareness of some of the risk factors, a large gap remained regarding why some offenders seek fame, and the differences between those offenders and their predecessors (Lankford, 2016b). Based on this enriched

understanding and expansion of knowledge, researchers will be able to probe further into mass murder, ultimately expanding on the resources for threat assessment as well as improvements for mental health, such as stigma reduction.

Lankford (2016b) identified a group of fame-seeking individuals who made direct statements wishing to gain fame and recognition. However, Lankford also expressed the need for these individuals to receive more detailed study. What remains for exploration and what this study addresses includes psychosocial characteristics of individuals attempting or completing mass murder, as well as social media and leakage behavior as it relates to the concept of fame. A small number of researchers have examined the victims and crimes involved with mass murder, but failed to explore fame seeking as a psychological concept. The research questions served as guidance for exploring the concepts of psychosocial characteristics and social media behavior of individuals who have completed or attempted murder and sought fame.

In Chapter 3, I provide a description of the role of the qualitative researcher relation to the selection criteria; the sample population; and reading, coding, analyzing, verifying, and reporting the results of the data. I offer a review of researcher biases and ethical issues, as well as my rationale for the number of cases for this research study, criteria for inclusion, and participant selection. Also in Chapter 3 is a detailed review of the method of data collection as well as an outline of data coding and analysis procedures to answer the research questions. Last is a discussion of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reliability.

This study incorporated an examination of psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior of 12 American individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. I used open-source data to determine psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior to identify common characteristics and behaviors among offenders. I gathered data and subsequently analyzed and coded each piece of data multiple times to ensure the highest possible levels of validity, reliability, and transferability relating to a qualitative study. Findings in this study were sufficient for me to answer both research questions relating to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior among offenders who made statements desiring fame, as well as to confirm prior assumptions.

Chapter 5 concludes with a focus on the purpose and nature of the study and a discussion of the reasoning behind this research. I summarize the research as it relates to current literature on mass murder and mass murderers, and how these findings add to that knowledge base. I end with examining limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research studies, and lastly, provide a discussion of how this study impacts social change initiatives.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

My purpose in this study was to provide an analysis into the psychosocial characteristics and social media behavior of fame-seeking individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. I examined open-source data of 12 individuals who had made statements, whether written, verbal, or on some form of social media, with regard to fame. My goal was to determine common characteristics and variables among those perpetrators, while attempting to answer research questions relating to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior on social media platforms. Theories relating to social learning, family dynamics, psychopathy, and the copycat effect served as the framework and provided a guide to analysis and coding.

I based these criteria for selection on Lankford's (2016) criteria of fame-seeking mass murderers, which were direct statements made by mass murderers wanting to achieve fame or notoriety. Such statements included wanting to achieve a higher body count than a predecessor, to gain recognition, to have a media story dedicated to them, or to see the act filmed live on Facebook or a similar social media account

Criteria for the case selection appear in this chapter. The first rationale for selection was that the individual must have at least attempted to commit a mass murder. Various definitions of mass murder exist; for the purposes of this study, it meant only that an individual claimed wanting to commit a mass murder and kill multiple people. Although some of these cases were not able to complete a mass murder, they had the intent and are likely psychologically similar to those who did commit a mass murder.

Some perpetrators accomplished their goal and committed a mass murder event. For those who did, the definition I used in this study is the FBI (2005/2008) definition of a homicide of four or more individuals, excluding the perpetrator, with no cooling off period. To be eligible for my study, the perpetrators must have committed their crime within the United States and to have made a direct statement of wanting to achieve fame. Examples of such statements included wanting to kill a certain number of people, wanting to be on the news, or desiring recognition for the crime. I chose 12 cases from a population of individuals publicly available from various websites, databases, and books. Some of the information was public record through the FBI and the Freedom of Information Act (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). Because I did not use live subjects for this study and I used open-source data, the ethical concerns and considerations were minimal. Furthermore, no issues existed regarding power, misleading subjects, or subjects inadvertently gaining access to my research.

In this chapter, I restate the rationale for using a qualitative grounded theory approach and explain my role as the researcher. I also outline my responsibilities, which included analyzing and coding, as well as provide some psycholinguistic analyses of social media and writings of the perpetrators. I discuss techniques for bias minimization, which included triangulation, reflexivity, and examining personal biases (Creswell, 2014). As the researcher, my job was to accurately present the information case by case, with minimal bias, in a precise and reliable manner.

A risk associated with this study was determining the truthfulness of information provided by the mass murderers, in part because half the individuals are deceased. Silver

et al. (2018) identified several reasons leakage behavior and other forms of communication occur, including isolation, resentment, distress, perception of being treated wrongly, anger, and a desire to achieve justice. For some of these individuals, why they committed the offense may always be unclear, as the only evidence to their motive is in the communications left behind, often at the crime scene. These communications served as the best opportunity for gaining insight into their psychological mindset at the time of their crimes (Egnoto & Griffin, 2016).

I collected and coded data to answer two research questions based on fame. I then examine themes that manifested from the data, largely in the areas of psychological traits, social traits, family dynamics, and leakage and preoffense behavior (mainly related to social media). This chapter also includes a discussion of trustworthiness, credibility, triangulation, dependability, and confirmability, all based on Creswell's (2014) concepts of the terms.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

I designed this study with the intent of answering the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What are the characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?

*Research Question 2:* What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame when it comes to social media platforms?



My focus in this study was fame-seeking individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. A qualitative grounded theory approach consisted of multiple case studies. This method allowed for synthesis of multiple theoretical views, examination of categorical relationships, and detailed data collection (Creswell, 2014). This focus aided in providing a deeper analysis of the psychosocial characteristics and social media activity of the study subjects.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In this study, my role as the researcher involved data collection, followed by data analysis and interpretation. Because the data in this study are open-source data, my role was limited to reading documents and coding data. I was unable to fill the typical role of a qualitative researcher, which, according to Creswell (2014), is conducting interviews, making observations (unstructured or structured), and recording information. Furthermore, because of the nature of the study in which I used open-source data, there was no personal connection to the research population. This eliminated any potential dual relationships that might have arisen during the study.

Despite a reduced chance for dual relationships, qualitative open-source data research allows for certain biases, and the risk for bias can be stronger in a qualitative study than a quantitative study (Creswell, 2014). I made every attempt to avoid these biases in data collection and analysis. However, due to the high-profile nature of many of these cases, it is likely the data were skewed in some way. Attempts at triangulation helped to reduce bias. As a researcher, it is my ethical obligation to report multiple perspectives and views (Creswell, 2014). I minimized the biases and reduced clutter and

mistakes by adhering to the process of coding set forth at the beginning of the study, including reading all information at least three times.

To keep my research organized and the coding process structured and unbiased, it was important to maintain a uniform process for each individual studied. I began by developing an overall profile of each participant, examining psychosocial characteristics and family dynamics, and then conducting an analysis of fame-seeking behavior on social media. I subsequently examined each case for themes based on a triangulation of multiple theoretical approaches. Themes related to social learning, family dynamics, psychopathy, and copycat behavior, which I subsequently used to provide an analytical framework for data analysis with the goal of answering the research questions.

A master codebook allowed me to keep track of linguistic phrases and words relevant to the psychological aspects of this study. I used NVivo 12 software to analyze my data, as the program allowed for coding and analysis of themes in inputted data, as well as provided a way to digitally organize and archive material. Creswell (2014) suggested that typing notes, clustering similar information, and looking for themes can help purge large clumps of data, and I chose to follow those recommendations.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Subjects Selection Logic**

I selected a purposeful sample of 12 individuals who completed or attempted a mass murder attack, as well as those who made a statement of some type displaying a desire for fame. I chose 12 subjects because Creswell (2014) recommended a minimum of five subjects in this type of study to reach saturation. To classify those individuals who

did commit a mass murder, I used the FBI (2005/2008) definition of four fatalities in a single event with no cooling-off period. These criteria allowed me to classify eligible acts of mass murder and reject those that did not fit the appropriate classifications—for example, cases in which the offender committed another crime, such as robbery, in the process of mass murder.

Additionally, I excluded perpetrators from countries other than the United States. Based on a classification developed by Peete et al. (1997), I also excluded those who committed murder with secondary offenses, such as homicides with felony-related motivation, gang-related violence, political motivations, and acts of terrorism. I excluded those who attempted to kill or who only killed family members or personal acquaintances, as they did not meet the FBI (2005/2008) definition of a mass murderer. I built upon the criteria of fame-seeking mass murderers proposed by Lankford (2016c), which included direct statements made by offenders regarding fame. Additionally, I went with the belief that any perpetrator who leaves behind a form of communication, to include suicide note, manifesto, or video, qualifies as a fame-seeking individual (Lankford, 2016; Van Dreal, 2011). For the purposes of this study, and as part of the selection and exclusion criteria, I only selected mass murderers located within the United States who committed or attempt to commit mass murder in public settings.

I began my research by conducting an Internet search of fame-seeking mass murderers. Lankford (2016c) compiled an extensive list of offenders who made statements seeking fame. I cross-referenced this with various other researchers and

scholars, including Langman (2015a, 2017b), who noted that mass murderers express a desire for fame and glory and have a tendency to copy prior perpetrators.

After compiling a structured list of subjects, I then researched each individual thoroughly to ensure I compiled as much information as possible. Before evaluating the data, I conducted a comprehensive search on several topics, including mass murder and murderers, the locations of the offenses, the type of crimes, the weapon or style of attack, and the casualties associated with the attack. I also did this to ensure triangulation occurred in such a way as to avoid bias. I searched each mass murderer's name with separate terms such as *fame-seeking*, *manifesto*, *journal blog*, *social media*, *family*, *siblings*, *court documents*, *law documents*, and various other terms (see Appendix A for a comprehensive list of search terms). Various resources I used to gather information on study subjects included scholarly journals, nonscholarly sources such as public media sources, open-source documents, books, and public records.

### **Sources of Data**

In this research study, the primary source of data was open-source documents, which included verbal statements, videos, journal entries, and social media posts. This open-source data provided the most in-depth insight into many of the perpetrators' minds, since some murderers have committed suicide and the rest are incarcerated. I exercised careful consideration when examining data due to purported lack of rigor (Sarma, 2015). A first-person narrative or interview was not possible; therefore, open-source data served to answer the two research questions. While examining the data, I combed each piece for content relating to psychological characteristics, social characteristics, and family

dynamics of fame-seeking mass murderers and attempted mass murderers. I also sought to answer each question relating to the theoretical frameworks presented by Bandura (1977), Millon (Millon & Davis, 1996), Sulloway (1996), and O'Toole et al. (2015) by using qualitative thematic coding and NVivo 12 to organize the data.

### **Instruments**

As a researcher in a qualitative study, I served as the key instrument, collecting all the data (Creswell, 2014). Avoiding bias and having rigor of instrumentation (Chenail, 2011; Sarma, 2015) can be very challenging for qualitative researchers (Chenail, 2011). This is due to the researcher being the primary individual responsible for collecting data. The researcher can also influence the means of data dissemination to the general public (Chenail, 2011). To keep my research organized and the coding process structured and unbiased, it was important to keep the process the same for each individual I studied. I began by developing an overall profile of each case, incorporating psychological, social, and family traits, and then conducting an analysis of any important psycholinguistic information. I examined each for themes based on triangulation of multiple theoretical approaches, examination of factors, and comparison of study subjects. I developed a master codebook, which was important for the psycholinguistic portion, to determine which linguistic phrases and words were relevant when it came to the psychological aspects of this study.

I established eligibility by using Lankford's (2016b) criteria for fame-seeking mass murderers, which included making direct statements regarding fame-seeking or attention-seeking (e.g., higher victim counts, media attention, and attention from peers) as

well as a manifesto or similar document, or a personal statement from the offender.

Multiple pieces of data were necessary to answer the two research questions. However, because this was a qualitative research study, I was the sole researcher and performed all the coding and data analyses; therefore, I took much care to avoid personal biases and subjectivity (Creswell, 2014). Gathering multiple sources of data, using multiple rounds of coding, and using reflexivity to determine how my role can change the course of the entire study were all ways to mitigate personal biases.

### **Data Collection**

I collected open-source documentation, which included verbal statements, videos, journal entries, and social media posts from the sample of 12 fame-seeking mass murderers and attempted mass murders. Prior to the formal process of analysis and coding, I read each document carefully, clustered similar topics, used rich description, assembled data by categories, and recoded data, if necessary (Creswell, 2014).

**Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?** I read, analyzed, and coded each piece of open-source data to identify unexplored psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking mass murderers and attempted mass murderers. I also examined for themes relating to social learning theory, family dynamics, psychopathy, and copycat behavior.

**Research Question 2: What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame on social media platforms?** I read, analyzed, and coded each piece of open-source data

to explore and identify themes related to the ways fame-seeking mass murderers and attempted mass murders express their need for fame on social media platforms.

Subsequently, I examined data for themes relating to social learning theory, family dynamics, psychopathy, and copycat behavior.

The process of collecting data during this research study entailed gathering information on each mass murderer. This involved going through all the listed resources, such as scholarly journals, public media, and government databases, and compiling information. NVivo 12 software allowed me to organize the data collection process. Data collection was an important process, because keeping the information organized helped me to identify themes and extract the most relevant data from large quantities of information.

I used Microsoft Word primarily for writing up the analysis of data and organizing information, and relied on Microsoft Excel for the spreadsheet feature, which allowed organization of large amounts of data. After data collection, NVivo 12 was a means to code and analyze the data. This software allowed for automated coding and enhanced data visualization, which assisted with faster coding and viewing connections and themes in data.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data I used for this research study consisted of open-source data obtained from books, journals, notes, videos, and other forms of personal communication by the sample population. I used criteria borrowed from Lankford (2016b) when selecting fame-seeking mass murderers for my population, based on the knowledge that fame-seeking

mass murderers seek fame through killing and often do so primarily to gain media attention.

To keep my research organized and the coding process structured and unbiased, it was important to keep the process the same for each individual I studied. I chose to use NVivo 12 to aid in the coding process, as hand coding was time consuming (Creswell, 2014). During data analysis and coding, I used the technique of winnowing to narrow down more relevant data, disregarding data that was not relevant to my study (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). I made a list of words that served as a guide in searching for themes and interrelated words. The process first involved verifying accuracy of data by using multiple types of sources, organizing data, reading through data, and coding the data by computer. Next, I examined data for themes and descriptive content. The aim was to interpret the data and extract and interpret correlating themes across the study subjects' profiles and data (Creswell, 2014).

More specifically, I begin by developing an overall profile of each participant, examining psychological and social characteristics, family history, and any important psycholinguistic information. This included exploring relationships between linguistic behavior and psychological processes. This process of psycholinguistic analysis was based on basic linguistic theory (Dixon, 1977), which involves analysis in an attempt to determine psychological meaning behind the words used by individuals. I examined each case for themes based on a triangulation of multiple theoretical approaches. Developing a master codebook was also important for the psycholinguistic portion to determine which



linguistic phrases and words were relevant when it came to the psychological aspects of this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

**Credibility.** Creswell (2014) identified triangulation as a way to achieve accuracy and validity. I implemented triangulation by gathering data or findings from different sources to build themes and frameworks. This process helped reduce biases by using reliable data, such as the spoken or written words of the perpetrators, in gathering and examining multiple theories, as well as using exhaustive descriptions, to convey findings to the readers (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I assessed multiple sources, compared the different offenders, and use multiple perspectives to provide triangulation.

Another strategy that helped clarify biases was self-reflection, which enabled me to be aware of personal biases and influences on the research. To ensure saturation, I selected 12 cases that I deemed were representative of the population and brought rich information to the study. Researcher dependability and reliability was also important, which I obtained by immersing myself within the vast amount of literature.

**Transferability.** To ensure the greatest degree of transferability, or generalizability, I made sure during the analyzing and coding process not only to adhere to a strict triangulation process, but also utilize a constant comparison method, thus adopting a multidimensional theoretical approach (Leung, 2015). Leung also recommended using tables and detailed notes to ensure generalizability and an organized process, which I did use.

**Dependability.** Cope (2014) described dependability as consistency of participant views—in this case, data—as well as the interpretation of that data and the manner of data representation. As a researcher, it was important for me to clearly and fully describe the process in as much detail each step of the way, taking care to keep detailed notes. As long as this occurred in a precise manner, individuals with similar experiences who read the study would deem it dependable and credible (Cope, 2014).

**Confirmability.** As part of the research process, relating to confirmability, I represented the words and actions of the subjects as accurately as possible. Presenting the data accurately helped avoid my own biases and interferences. Cope (2014) stated that an effective way for researchers to do this is to describe how they arrived at conclusions at each step of the process, as well as to provide discussion of interpretations and findings. Additionally, Cope suggested supplementing the research with rich quotes from subjects to assist with portraying themes, as present in this study.

**Intracoder reliability.** I achieved intracoder reliability by undertaking a continuous coding and recoding process, as well as a repeated analysis of my data while using NVivo 12. This ensured results reliability over time and minimized threats, including influence such as fatigue and stress making me prone to human error. Intercoder reliability was not a factor in this research study, because I was the only coder for the data set.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Typical concerns in relation to participants would include research methods that ensure privacy, consideration for security of data, storage of data for at least 5 years,

consideration of participants' privacy, confidentiality agreements, a plan for sharing results with stakeholders, minimization of risks, minimized conflicts of interests, an agreement for data use, and recruitment of participants in a noncoercive manner.

This study comprised open-source data. For this reason, there were no foreseen ethical concerns regarding human subjects. I did not need permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board to gather information relating to my subjects. Additionally, all the documents that I required for my study were publicly available, much of it due to the Freedom of Information Act (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). No confidentiality agreements were necessary, as I did not interview participants; this study involved subjects who were either deceased or incarcerated. I took care to keep confidential the names of subjects' family members, even though that information is also publicly available. Data will remain stored on a computer, as well as a personal, password-protected private server, for 5 years following completion of the study. There were no concerns of funding, as all the information needed was free. Because I used open-source data, I was not concerned with any conflicts of interest in my study. There was no issue of a power and/or control relationship, because I collected my own data. I also did not have to recruit participants for this study, so there was no risk of coercion.

### **Summary and Transition**

In Chapter 3, I discussed how I plan on using results from my research study to answer two research questions. The central phenomenon studied was the psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking individuals who have completed or attempted mass murder. I provided rationale for my study, as well as my role as the researcher. Taking

care to identify the ways by which I avoided personal biases maintained reliability and validity throughout my research.

I explained my methods of utilizing the Internet to conduct research and assemble and gather information relating to my sample population. I identified the criteria for my study based on combined criteria supported by previous researchers and current definitions of mass murder. I also identified the location criteria, which involved using only individuals located within the United States. I restated my two research questions and described how I applied them to the data-collection process, including analyzing and coding.

Information on specific data collection procedures is included. I identified the search engines and databases, as well as keywords searched within those resources. I also outlined steps taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and intracoder reliability within my research. I detailed how this study included a process of repeated reading, coding, and analyzing, as well as triangulation, rich description, and reflection of personal biases. These occurred while taking careful and detailed notes throughout the entire process to facilitate future transferability of findings.

This study incorporated an examination of psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior of 12 American individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. I analyzed open-source data to determine psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior to identify common characteristics and behaviors among offenders. I gathered data, and then analyzed and coded each piece of data multiple times to ensure the highest possible levels of validity, reliability, and transferability relating to a qualitative study.

Findings in this study were sufficient to answer both research questions relating to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior among offenders known to have made statements desiring fame, thus confirming prior assumptions.

Chapter 5 concludes with a focus on the purpose and nature of the study and a discussion of the reasoning behind this research. I summarize the research as it relates to current literature on mass murder and mass murderers and how these findings add to that knowledge base. I end with examining limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research studies, and lastly, provide a discussion of how this study impacts social change initiatives.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

Mass murder, although on the rise, is still a rare event, and comprises fewer than a quarter of homicides in the United States (Auxemery, 2015; Hamlett, 2017).

Though mass murder occurs relatively infrequently, it receives considerable coverage in mainstream media (Bondü & Beier, 2015; Cohen et al., 2014; Follman, 2015b; Hamlett, 2017; Huff-Corzine et al., 2014; Lowe & Galea, 2017; Towers, et al., 2015). Researchers, law enforcement personnel, and mental health officials have explored various risk factors and traits of individuals believed to have a propensity for mass violence. Some of these risk factors were related to mental health, such as suicidal tendencies, mental deficiencies, and cognitive distortions (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Stone, 2015). Others individuals and groups have attributed social inadequacies, repeated failures, and a need for revenge as motivation (Fox & Fridel, 2016; Langman, 2017c; Stone, 2015).

Acts of mass murder are committed predominately by males (Stone, 2015). Some have posited that mass murderers are individuals with mental illness (Duwe, 2013; Follman et al., 2015). Others (Fox & Fridel, 2016; Rokach, 2017) have noted that mass murderers simply share common characteristics such as depression, resentment, fascination with weapons, and expressions of hate (both written and verbal). Bullying may also be a contributing factor in mass murder, although some have argued that mass murderers were not the victims of bullying, but the perpetrators (Langman, 2009; Mears et al., 2017).

Several common myths exist with mass murder, and the media focuses on these myths. One of these is the belief that mass murderers suddenly lose control, driven to commit violence (Meloy, 2014). However, evidence exists that mass murder is planned days, weeks, and sometimes months in advance (Langman, 2017c; Meloy, 2014; O'Toole et., 2014) with elements of fantasy present (Murray, 2015). Other myths addressed include that mass murder is easy to profile, mass murder is on the rise, mass murderers abuse/use drugs, and that it is easy to predict mass murder (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Madfis, 2017; Meloy, 2014).

Past researchers on mass murder have focused on policy changes and gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Concluding that mass murderers are focused on fame and competition, some have cited past mass murderers' desire to outdo predecessors (Langman, 2017c; Lankford, 2016a). Although some knowledge of mass murderers and their psychological characteristics exists, questions remain with regard to motives and mentality of mass murderers before the event (Eskey et al., 2015; Rokach; 2017).

I selected 12 individuals for this case study to provide a deeper analysis of psychosocial characteristics and social media activity to gain better insight into fame-seeking individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. Through data analysis relating to psychosocial characteristics and analysis of social media focusing on psycholinguistic traits, I was able to identify common characteristics and behavior. The research questions corresponding with the findings and identified themes are as follows:

*Research Question 1:* What are the unexplored psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?

*Research Question 2:* What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame on social media platforms?

This chapter begins with an overview of the study subjects, followed by the data collection and methodology used, as well as the data recording processes. I then identify in detail the steps I used in recording data, as well as those involved in analyzing and coding. Identification of the data analysis procedures includes addressing issues of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

I present the findings for each of the 12 subjects, beginning with a brief synopsis of each individual, followed by an outline of his behavior relating to the event. Subsequently, after relating psychosocial information on each perpetrator, I provide a list of identified themes and commonalities relating to fame seeking. Also presented is a discussion of frequency of words in communications, including statistical information based on the 12 offenders. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how the findings answered the research questions and confirmed prior research, and to what extent.

### **Demographics**

Study subjects were 12 individuals who completed or attempted mass murder in the United States and who made a statement indicating the desire for fame. They executed their attacks in a public place using at least one firearm. I created a profile of each offender, which I subsequently logged into an Excel spreadsheet. Characteristics examined included fame-seeking behavior, psychological characteristics, personality traits, evidence of violence, family dynamics, manifestos/writings, copycat and leakage



behavior, setbacks and failures, education-related issues, societal views, prior criminal activity, and cultural background (if relevant). I examined communications of each perpetrator. These forms of communication ,varied and included videos, journals, blogs, suicide notes, Internet chats, forum posts, and creative writings. Videos ranged in length from 2 minutes and 7 seconds to 1 hour and 2 minutes. Written communications ranged from a single page to 137 pages.

All perpetrators in this study were males acting alone, except for two males who committed an attack together. The youngest perpetrator was 14 years old and the oldest was 26 years old, giving these offenders an average age of 20 years. Eight of the 12 individuals examined committed suicide and four survived the attack. On average, each offender killed 8.42 victims and wounded 9.92. Attacks were an assortment of random, target, and mixed, with attack sites that included elementary schools, high schools, colleges, and public businesses. Four were bifurcated incidents where perpetrators killed family or acquaintances before the larger event (Walters, Drislane, Patrick, & Hickey, 2015).

### **Data Collection**

I collected data on each of the perpetrators that highlighted their fame-seeking intentions; many of these were manifestos and journals. I also compiled known writings seemingly evident of leakage behavior of the offenders, and analyzed documents relating to psychosocial characteristics. I transcribed all videos that I used to analyze word content and themes. I read, examined, and transcribed all data a minimum of three times

before coding. To assist with the coding process, I also used NVivo 12 software to conduct qualitative analysis of themes, word counts, and organization of documents.

Data gathering and coding occurred in a manner related to the research questions that address psychosocial characteristics and social media behavior in fame-seeking individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. Data coding also took place to correlate with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), birth order and family dynamics (Sulloway, 1996), theories of psychopathy (Millon & Davis, 1996), and the copycat effect (O'Toole et al., 2014). Direct quotes throughout the chapter supplement findings and themes. Organization of perpetrators is by date of offense, starting with the earliest and ending with the most recent.

### **Data Analysis**

After numerous readings of all data, I was able to identify themes representing psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior based on the theoretical framework presented earlier. I was also able to identify common characteristics and traits among each fame-seeking offender aligning with theories of Bandura (1977), birth order and family dynamics (1996), psychopathy (Millon & Davis, 1996), and the copycat effect (O'Toole et al., 2014), all themes that drove the coding process. Direct quotations from manifestos, journals, videos, and other sources appear in the Results sections of this study. I found evidence of six main themes directly corresponding to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior identified in the Results section.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

As stated in Chapter 3, several measures helped to address issues of trustworthiness. For credibility, I implemented the technique of triangulation described by Creswell (2014). This involved using data deemed as reliable as possible, in this case, communications directly from each offender, using multiple theoretical approaches relating to my research questions, thorough descriptions, intergroup and intragroup comparison of offenders, and multiple sources. I also periodically used self-reflection to identify personal biases. This was important due to the high visibility these events and perpetrators receive on mainstream media.

In this study, I addressed a specific population in the United States. Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative studies vary by nature. As recommended by Creswell, I did provide a detailed account of the study, my role in the research, and my basis for selecting fame-seeking perpetrators, and I used vivid descriptions of the data collection process. Although these results may be unique to this population, offenders fit other typologies found by previous researchers, increasing the possibility of transferability. This process of providing detailed descriptions required carefully reading and recording themes in the data, and then transferring that information to Excel and NVivo for organization and analysis.

Also mentioned in Chapter 3 was a discussion of dependability and the process of interpreting data as accurately as possible or as presented (Cope, 2014). This involved reading each piece of data multiple times, coding, examining for themes, recording preliminary findings in Excel and NVivo, and using both software programs for

interpretation and creation of graphics to display data. My hope is that future researchers can replicate this process.

To ensure confirmability, I represented my findings and information relating to each perpetrator as accurately as possible. As previously stated, I made sure to reflect and revisit personal biases. Taking care to document the process, providing notes, and being as detailed as possible are all ways to ensure internal validity and accuracy for an outside reader/auditor. With the process, I used my judgment to winnow the data and remove unnecessary pieces of information (Guest et al., 2012).

## **Results**

### **Research Questions**

*Research Question 1:* What are the unexplored psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?

*Research Question 2:* What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame on social media platforms?

### **Examination of Psychosocial Characteristics**

#### **Case 1: Dylan Klebold and Case 2: Eric Harris**

Seventeen-year-old Dylan Bennet Klebold and 18-year-old Eric David Harris committed a mass shooting on April 20, 1999. They began their attack at Columbine High School beginning at 11:19 a.m., which lasted until both perpetrators committed suicide at 12:08 p.m. The attack began with a bomb set off to create a diversion, after which they walked into the school cafeteria and placed two propane bombs in duffel

bags. When the bombs failed to detonate, the two individuals walked into the school and started shooting (Jefferson County, Colorado, Sheriff, 2000).

An investigation by Jefferson County Sheriff's Office revealed the attackers were planning the incident for about a year. In their journals and online blogs, the individuals discussed their plans extensively, and detailed a large scale attack similar to the Oklahoma City bombing that occurred in 1995. The pair originally intended to commit their attack on April 19, 1999, but due to allegedly being unprepared, they waited until April 20. The incident resulted in 13 killed and 21 injured (Jefferson County, Colorado, Sheriff, 2000).

**Dylan Klebold, age 17.** Klebold likely had schizotypal personality disorder or a similar personality disorder. He was not as adept as hiding his quirks and struck people as odd. He wrote about being shy in his journal. Like Harris, he also claimed to be godlike and saw himself as inhuman (Langman, 2014). Klebold wanted to obtain the most deaths in history, and also hoped that movie directors would be fighting over the rights to his and Harris's story (Lankford, 2016c).

Examining psychological characteristics, Klebold displayed depressed and suicidal tendencies, as evidenced by a journal entry: "Fact: People are so unaware . . well, Ignorance is bliss I guess . . . that would explain my depression" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-001-026385). He detailed his unhappiness, being unlucky with girls, and how he would cut himself, with his sadness and anger eventually turning into resentment:

I was Mr. Cutter tonight — I have 11 depressioners [*sic*] on my right hand now, & my favorite contrasting symbol, because it is so true & means so much. The battle between good & bad never ends . . . OK enough bitchin . . . well I'm not done yet. OK go . . . I don't know why I do wrong with people (mainly women) —it's like they are set out to hate & ignore me, I never know what to say or do. [redacted] is soo fuckin lucky he has no idea how I suffer. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-001-026390)

Later, after stating he was in love, Klebold wrote about his depression, realizing the girl he loved did not love him back. He became so upset, he wrote about feeling suicidal:

Oooh god I want to die sooo bad...such a sad desolate lonely unsalvageable I feel I am...not fair, NOT FAIR!!! I wanted happiness!! I never got it...Let's sum up my life...the most miserable existence in the history of time . . . my best friend has ditched me forever, lost in bettering himself & having/enjoying/taking for granted his love...I've NEVER knew this . . . not 100 times near this . . . they look at me [redacted] like I'm a stranger . . . I helped them both out thru life, & they left me in the abyss of suffering when I gave them the [?] The one who I thought was my true love, [redacted] is not. Just a shell of what I want the most...the meanest trick was played on me [redacted] a fake love...she in reality doesn't give a good fuck about me...doesn't even know me...I have no happiness, no ambitions, no friends, & no LOVE!!! [Redacted] can get me that gun I hope, I wanna use it on a poor SOB. I know . . . his name is vodka, dylan is

his name too. What else can I do/give...I stopped the pornography. I try not to pick on people. Obviously at least one power is against me.[redacted]...funny how I've been thinking about her over the last few days...giving myself fake realities that she, others MIGHT have liked me, just a bit...my [bad?] I have always been hated, by everyone & everything, just never aware...Goodbye all the crushes I've ever had, just shells...images, no truths...BUT WHY? YES, you can read this, why did [illegible words]. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-001-26396)

Throughout his journal, Klebold wrote about humanity, life, death, and more loneliness and suicidal thoughts, even composing poem about these subjects:

Ignorance is bliss  
 happiness is ambition  
 desolation is knowledge  
 pain is acceptance  
 despair is anger  
 denial is helpless  
 martyrism [*sic*] is hope for others  
 advantages taken are causes of martyrism [*sic*] revenge is sorrow  
 death is a reprieve  
 life is a punishment  
 others' achievements are tormentations [*sic*] people are alike  
 I am different —Dylan

me is a god, a god of sadness  
 exiled to this eternal hell  
 the people I helped, abandon me  
 I am denied what I want,  
 To love & to be happy  
 Being made a human  
 Without the possibility of BEING human The cruelest of all punishments  
 To some I am crazy  
 It is so clear, yet so foggy  
 Everything's connected, separated  
 I am the only interpreter of this  
 Id rather have nothing than be nothing Some say godliness isn't nothing  
 Humanity is the something I long for  
 I just want something I can never have The story of my existence. —Dylan.  
 (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-001-26397)

Not only did Klebold express depression and loneliness, he also displayed symptoms of other psychological disorders, including expressing narcissism and delusional thoughts of being like God:

Dark. Light. God. Lucifer. Heaven. Hell. GOOD. BAD. Yes, the ever-lasting contrast. Since existence has known the 'fight' between good & evil has continued. Obviously, this fight can never end. Good things turn bad, bad things become good, the 'people' on the earth see it as a battle they can win. HA fuckin



[sic] morons. If people looked at History [sic], they would see what happens. I think, too much, I understand, I am GOD compared to some of those un-existable [sic] brainless zombies. Yet, the actions of them interest me, like a kid with a new toy. Another contrast, more of a paradox, actually, like the advanced go for the undeveloped [sic] realm, while some of the morons become everything dwellers — but exceptions to every rule, & this is a BIG exception —most morons never change, they never decide to live in the ‘everything’ frame of mind. (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026393)

At times, Klebold expressed bizarre thoughts, giving more evidence to a personality disorder and dissociative tendencies. He referred to himself in the third person:

A lot on the past though . . . I’ve always had a thing for the past — how it reacts to the present & the future —or rather vice versa. I wonder how/when I got so fucked up w my mind, existence, problem — when Dylan Benet [sic] Klebold got covered up by this entity containing Dylan’s body . . . as I see the people at school —some good, some bad —I see how different I am (aren’t we all you’ll say) yet I’m on such a greater scale of difference than everyone else (as far as I know, or guess). I see jocks having fun, friends, women, LIVEZ [sic]. (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026389)

Klebold spoke very little about his family in his journals, and it is difficult to determine the relationship he had with them. In one passage, he wrote briefly how he

believed they hated him. Additionally, he related his resentment toward them for wanting him to have ambition:

Some god I am. . . . All people I ever might have loved have abandoned me, my parents piss me off & hate me . . . want me to have fuckin ambition!! How can I when I get screwed & destroyed by everything??!! I have no money, no happiness, no friends . . . Eric will be getting further away soon. . . . I'll have less than nothing . . . how normal. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026400)

Klebold did not detail his educational experiences extensively in his journal. He did, however, mention attempting to be kind to other students:

I do shit to supposedly 'cleanse' myself in a spiritual, moral sort of way (deleting the wads on my computer, not getting drunk for periods of time, trying not to ridicule/make fun of people ([redacted]) at school), yet it does nothing to help my life morally. My existence is shit to me —how I feel that I am in eternal suffering, in infinite directions in infinite realities. Yet these realities are fake — artificial, induced [illegible] by thought, how everything connects, yet its all so far apart. . . . & I sit & think . . . science is the way to find solutions to everything, right? I still think that, yet I see different views of shit now — like the mind — yet if the mind is viewed scientifically . . . hmm. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026388)

Klebold expressed feelings of inadequacy, discussing the imbalance of power that he believed was in society. He wrote about getting a gun to kill people to satisfy these feelings of inferiority and anger:

Nobody will help me . . . only exist with me if it suits them. I helped, why can't they? [Redacted] will get me a gun, I'll go on my killing spree against anyone I want. More crazy . . . deeper in the spiral, lost highway repeating, dwelling on the beautiful past ([redacted] & [redacted] getting drunk) with me, everyone moves up, I always stayed. Abandonment. This room sucks wanna die everything is as least expected. The meek are trampled on, the assholes prevail, the gods are deceiving, lost in my little insane asylum with the outhouse [?] redneck music playing. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026401)

One passage reveals evidence that Klebold fantasized about deviance. He wrote about trying to discourage himself from having these thoughts:

I'm forever sorry, infinitely, about the pornos. My humanity has a foot fetish & bondage extreme liking. I try to thwart it sometimes to no effect. Yet the masturbation has stopped. I'm sorry [redacted]. Always I feel the [illegible] happiness here, thinking of her for brief moments. That's how I know everything is true. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026414)

In addition to the fantasies are evidence of planning NBK (an acronym for the movie *Natural Born Killers*, which Harris and Klebold used to refer to the shooting) and a sense of revenge in Klebold's writings. He also described how his anger, depression, and need for revenge had built up over time:

Soon. . . either I'll commit suicide, or I'll get with [redacted] & it will be NBK for us. My happiness. Her happiness. NOTHING else matters. I've been caught with most of my crimes —xpl [*sic*] drinking, smoking & the house vandalism, & the pipe bombs. If, by fate's choice, [redacted] didn't love me, I'd slit my wrist & blow up Atlanta strapped to my neck. It's good, understanding a hard road since my realization, but it gets easier. BUT IT DOESN'T! that's part of existence. Unpredictable. Existence is pure hell & pure heaven at the same time. I will never stop wondering. The lost highway will never end, the music in my head will never stop . . . total [illegible] part of existence. The hall will never end. The love will always be there. GOD I LOVE HER!!! It's so great to love.

Society is tightening its grip on me, & soon I & [redacted] will snap. We will have our revenge on society, & then be free, to exist in a timeless spaceless [*sic*] place of pure happiness. The purpose of life is to be happy & be with your love who is equally happy. Not much more to say. Goodbye. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026404-26405)

Two years prior to the attack, Klebold and Harris got into legal trouble for breaking into a van and attempting to steal equipment. Klebold wrote in Harris's yearbook, expressing his desire for revenge:

Ahhhh, my favorite book. We, the gods, will have so much fun with NBK!!

Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops!! My wrath for January's incident will be godlike. Not to mention our revenge in the commons. GAWWWD sooo many people need to die. & now, a fun look at the past: (science-desk style) ((You

know what I hate??? PEOPLE!! YEAA!!)). (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026404-26237)

Though not detailed in the journal, Dylan was suspended for hacking into the computers at school, and also faced trouble for defacing lockers and having outbursts in class (Langman, 2016a).

Klebold referred to seeking fame in a series of videos the two males recorded in a basement. He discussed the possibility of their story being made into a movie:

Directors will be fighting over this story. I know we're gonna have followers because we're so fucking God-like. We're not exactly human—we have human bodies but we've evolved into one step above you, fucking human shit. We actually have fucking self-awareness. (Langman, 2017a, p. 5)

**Eric Harris, age 18.** The other perpetrator in the Columbine High School shooting. Harris was seemingly extremely narcissistic, writing things like “Ich bin Gott” (“I am God” in German) in people's yearbooks. Harris was highly skilled at hiding his narcissism, a practice known as impression management (Langman, 2014). Lankford (2016c) noted that Harris was particularly looking forward to finally get the respect he and his counterpart “deserved,” and that they would be starting a revolution. Although he did not mention specific mental health issues, Harris referenced receiving a prescription for a possible mood disorder:

My doctor wants to put me on medication to stop thinking about so many things and to stop getting angry. Well, I think that anyone who doesn't think like me is just bullshitting themselves. Try it sometime if you think you are worthy, which

you probably will you little shits, drop all your beliefs and views and ideas that have been burned into your head and try to think about why your here. But I bet most of you fuckers can't even think that deep, so that is why you must die.

(Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026007)

Some of Harris' writings are indicative of someone with extreme narcissism, as well as antisocial personality disorder. He recounted being able to lie and manipulate people and his lack of remorse:

You know what, I feel like telling about lies. I lie a lot. Almost constant, and to everybody, just to keep my own ass out of the water. And by the way (side note) I don't think I am doing this for attention, as some people may think. Let's see, what are some big lies I have told; "yeah I stopped smoking;" "for doing it not for getting caught," "no I haven't been making more bombs," "no I wouldn't do that," and of course, countless of other ones, and yeah I know that I hate liars and I am one myself, oh fucking well. It's ok if I am a hypocrite, but no one else, because I am higher than you people, no matter what you say if you disagree I would shoot you. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026013)

Harris addressed some rejection in his life, including being teased, resulting in his hatred of people:

It'll be very fucking hard to hold out until April. If people would give me more compliments all of this might still be avoidable . . . but probably not. Whatever I do people make fun of me, and sometimes directly to my face. I'll get revenge soon enough. Fuckers shouldn't have ripped on me so much huh! Ha! Then again

it's human nature to do what you did . . . so I guess I am also attacking the human race. I can't take it, it's not right . . . true . . . correct . . . perfect. I fucking hate the human equation. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026015)

Like Klebold, Harris did not discuss his family a great deal in his writings. He recalled that his father's being in the military made life hard, and that it caused him to lose quite a few friends:

In the course of my life, I have moved to different houses or locations about six times. The last three times I have moved, I left behind some of the greatest friends I ever had. Since my father was a United States Air Force pilot, we had to move often. It is always hard to leave close friends behind. And since most of them live on the other side of the country, I will probably never see many of them again.

(Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026772)

There is little mention of family in Harris's journal, but he does make reference to his older brother, Kevin, and their relationship:

This was a good thing, as opposed to getting up 1122 for school or some other bulls\*\$t. I would wake up to black skies & coffee bean aromas making their way around the house. I never liked coffee, but I loved the smell. I would dine on fancy breakfast cuisine, otherwise known as Cocoa Puffs. My brother would already be up, trying to impress our father by forcing down the coffee he hadn't grown to like yet. I always remember my brother trying to impress everyone, and myself thinking what a waste of time that would be. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026785)

Harris made it apparent several times throughout his journal that he did not like the structured nature of school:

Society may not realize what is happening but I have; you go to school, to get used to studying and learning how your [sic] “supposed to” so that drains or filters out a little bit of human nature. But that’s after your parents taught you what’s right and wrong even though you may think differently, you still must follow the rules. After school you are expected to get a job or go to college. To have more of your human nature blown out your ass. Society tries to make everyone act the same by burying all human nature and instincts. That’s what schools, laws, jobs, and parents do. If they realize it or not. And them, the few who stick to their natural instincts are casted out as psychos or lunatics or strangers or just plain different. crazy, strange, weird, wild, these words are not bad or degrading. If humans were let to live how we would naturally, it would be chaos and anarchy and the human race wouldn’t probably last that long, but hey guess what, that’s how it’s supposed to be!!!! (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026008)

Harris expressed some feelings of inadequacy, including discussing being bullied: “And no don’t fucking say ‘well that’s your fault’ because it isn’t, you people had my phone #, and I asked and all, but no. no don’t let the weird looking Eric KID come along, ooh fucking nooo” (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026018). In addition, Harris had a birth defect on his leg as well as a chest deformity, the latter of which required two surgeries (Langman, 2017a).



When referencing society, Harris made condescending and racist remarks, referring several times in his journal to Nazis:

HATE! I'm full of hate and I love it. I HATE PEOPLE and they better fucking fear me if they know what's good for 'em. Yes I hate and I guess I want others to know it, yes I'm a racist and I don't mind. Niggs [*sic*] and spics bring it on to themselves, and another thing, I am very racist towards white trash P.O.S.'s [*sic*] like [redacted] and [redacted] they deserve the hatred, otherwise I probably wouldn't hate them. It's a tragedy, the human nature of people will lead to their downfall. People's human nature will get them killed. Whether by me or Vodka, it's happened before, and not just school shootings like those pussy dumbasses over in Minnesota who squealed. Throughout history, its our fucking nature! I know how people are and why and I can't stand it! I love the Nazis too . . . by the way, I fucking can't get enough of the swastika, the SS, and the iron cross.

(Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026015)

Harris also had a criminal history before the shooting, dating back to the van theft incident with Klebold in January 1997, resulting in probation. Harris showed no remorse for the crime:

Isn't America supposed to be the land of the free? How come, If I'm free, I can't deprive a stupid fucking dumbshit [*sic*] from his possessions if he leaves them sitting in the front seat of his fucking van out in plain sight and in the middle of fucking nowhere on a Frifuckingday [*sic*] night. NATURAL SELECTION. Fucker should be shot. Same thing with all those rich snotty toadies at my school.

Fuckers think they are higher than me and everyone else with all their \$ just because they were born into it? Ich denk NEIN [German: I think not]. BTW, “sorry” is just a word. It doesn’t mean SHIT to me. (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026005)

Harris described fantasizing about violence, making references to rape and wanting to kill people:

Who can I trick into my room first? I can sweep someone off their feet, tell them what they want to hear, be all nice and sweet, and then “fuck ‘em [*sic*] like an animal, feel them from the inside” as Reznor said. Oh —that’s something else . . . that one NIN video I saw, “Broken” or “Closer” or something. The one where the guy is kidnapped and tortured like hell . . . actual hell. I want to do that too. I want to tear a throat out with my own teeth like a pop can. I want to gut someone with my hand, to tear a head off and rip out the heart and lungs from the neck, to stab someone in the gut, shove it up to their heart, and yank the fucking blade out of their rib cage! I want to grab some weak little freshman and just tear them apart like a wolf, show them who is god. Strangle them, squish their head, bite their temples in the skull, rip off their jaw, rip off their collar bones, break their arms in half and twist them around, the lovely sounds of bones cracking and flesh ripping, ahhh . . . so much to do and so little chances. (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026016)

Harris displayed some copycat behavior in his writing. He constantly referred to Nazis and Hitler, and even wrote in German. At one point, he addressed copycats in his journal:

As I said before, self-awareness is a wonderful thing. I know what all you fuckers are thinking and what to do to piss you off and make you feel bad. I always try to be different, but I always end up copying someone else. I try to be a mixture of different things and styles, but when I step out of myself I end up looking like others or others THINK I am copying. One big fucking problem is people telling me what to fuckin do, think, say, act, and everything else. I'll do what you say IF I feel like it. But people (ie, parents, cops, God, teachers) telling me what to [arrow to "do, think, say, act"] makes me not want to fucking do it! That's why my fucking name is REB!!! (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026005)

Harris hinted at his motivation for planning and committing the attack and referred to his motives both in journal form and video. While his counterpart had plans for revenge, Harris's motive was to kill as many as possible:

Someone's bound to say "what were they thinking?" when we go NBK or when we were planning it, so this is what I am thinking. "I have a goal to destroy as much as possible so I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy, or any of that, so I will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from Doom like FH or FS or demons, so it's either me or them. I have to turn off my feelings." Keep this in mind, I want to burn the world, I want to kill

everyone except about 5 people, who I will name later, so if you are reading this you are lucky you escaped my rampage because I wanted to kill you. It will be very tricky getting all of our supplies, explosives, weaponry, ammo, and then hiding it all and then actually planting it all so we can achieve our goal. But if we get busted any time, we start killing then and there, just like Wilks from the ALIENS, I ain't going out without a fight. (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026012)

Like Klebold, Harris also took inspiration from *Natural Born Killers*, and called himself "Indgo" and Klebold "Green," most likely referring to Charles Manson. Additionally, he made repeated reference to Nazi culture throughout his journal (Langman, 2017b), boasting, "And by the way, this Nazi report is boosting my love of killing even more. Like the early Nazi government, my brain is like a sponge, sucking up everything that sounds cool and leaving out all that is worthless. That's how Nazism was formed, and that's how I will be too!" (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-01-026014).

It is clear that, like Klebold, Harris saw his plan to kill as a movie for which he hoped to receive fame and notoriety. He emulated himself after characters from a movie, and even created his own movies. Harris and Klebold documented activities such as bomb making and talking about who they wanted to kill in videos known as the Basement Tapes. He appeared on the (now-destroyed ) videos saying, "I hope people have flashbacks. [*making shooting noises while aiming his shotgun*] Isn't it fun to get the respect we're going to deserve? We don't give a shit because we're going to die doing it"

(Langman 2017a, p. 4). In a journal entry, Harris wrote about his plan and the rationale for what he and Klebold would do:

Well hey fuckheads, there is no such thing as an actual “real world.” Its just another word like justice, sorry, pity, religion, faith, luck and so on. We are humans, if we don’t like something we have the fucking ability to change! But we don’t, at least you don’t, I would. You just whine/bitch throughout life but never do a goddamn thing to change anything. “man can eat, drink, fuck, and hunt and anything else he does is madness” —Based on Lem’s quote. Boy oh fuckin boy is that true. When I go NBK and people say things like, “oh, it was so tragic,” or “oh he is crazy!” or “It was so bloody.” I think, so the fuck what you think that’s a bad thing? Just because your mumsy and dadsy told you blood and violence is bad, you think it’s a fucking law of nature? Wrong. (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026006-26007)

### **Case 3: Alvaro Castillo, 18**

Alvaro Rafael Castillo committed a mass shooting at Orange High School in Orange County, North Carolina, on August 30, 2006. Before the school attack, Castillo murdered his father, Rafael, at home. Castillo had experienced several psychotic symptoms, claimed he had an evil twin brother named Red, and stated Red told him to do evil things. He attempted suicide four months prior to his attack. His father intervened, and Castillo interpreted this as God wanting him to live and commit his attack. Castillo rationalized that he would be saving children from the evil of the world if he killed them (Langman, 2012a).

Castillo often said he was planning “Operation Columbine” and wanted to remind the world about Columbine (Langman, 2012a; Lankford, 2016c). His mother even brought him to visit Columbine High School; in addition, Castillo bought a trench coat, named a shotgun the same as Eric Harris had named his, and attempted suicide on the anniversary of the Columbine shooting (Castillo, 2006).

Throughout Castillo’s journal, he made clear his plans for his shooting, his suicidal tendencies, and his depressive thoughts : “I am feeling depressed these days. I drown my sadness and depression with work, cleaning, and movies. Still, it just keeps coming back” (Castillo, 2006, p. 6).

When it comes to failures and rejections, Castillo had military aspirations that never materialized. He joined the Army National Guard but did not fit in. The military discharged Castillo after an attempted suicide (Langman, 2019).

Castillo described having sexual fantasies involving his evil twin brother, “Red,” and attributed his depression and “dark side” to the failure of his antidepressant:

I just became interested in rated R movies when I was 7 years old around the same time I was shown pornography. I am having sexual fantasies these days and fantasies of being held hostage by an evil twin brother. I assume that represents my dark side. I can’t even cry! The anti-depressant I am taking doesn’t seem to be working. On August 29, my depression will end permanently. I just want to die. I don’t want to live like this anymore. I have endured 10 years. (Castillo, 2006)

Castillo displayed elements of paranoia, possible schizophrenia, and psychosis. To rationalize his behavior for killing, he wrote he was saving children from sin by killing them:

If I was mentally well, maybe I could've told her my feelings. I do feel sorry for scaring her. I know I am sick. What do you do with sick people like me. They can't change. You have to sacrifice them. Bad things could happen. We have to learn to sacrifice ourselves. I need to sleep now journal. Goodnight. (Castillo, 2006, p. 7)

Castillo referred to his family a small amount in his writings. He did not get along with his father, who was very domineering toward the family members. Castillo also reported wanting to kill his drill instructor in the National Guard, because was very strict and reminded him of his father (*State v. Castillo*, 2010). Castillo did kill his father and wrote the following journal entry:

I just killed my father. It felt good! He is finally dead. I do feel a little remorse. Still, he is finally with God and Tony. I loved my father. I hesitated but I finally did it. God be with him. (Castillo, 2006, p. 8)

Castillo made little reference of school, but in his trial, witnesses identified him as a good student who received good grades, despite having a lower-than-average IQ. However, he was shy and isolated himself from others. In addition, classmates thought he was strange, in part because he was obsessed with school shootings, mass murderers, and natural disasters (*State v. Castillo*, 2010).

An examination of Castillo's journal revealed that he planned the school shooting, which he named "Operation Columbine":

I am going to do it! I have been thinking about this moment since the 10th grade. I am going to buy a shotgun and I am going to commit suicide. I bought some audio cassette tapes so I can explain to the police and my parents about why I did it. I plan to commit suicide on either April 20th or April 21st. April 20th is an obvious choice, for it is the seventh anniversary of the Columbine High School Massacre. However, I want to see the documentaries that they will show on the History Channel. If [redacted] is here, I will wait until he leaves. Then, I will commit the act. I will send Anna an email telling her how much I love and care for her. I will tell her that I would pass by her house, and that I named my shotgun or rifle after her and the M-16 rifle in basic training. I will also call [redacted] and confess to him what I will do. I have to do this. (Castillo, 2006, p.2).

He wrote about his plans several times in the journal and discussed modeling his shotgun after Eric Harris's gun:

Well, today I have [given] Arlene a complete makeover. I turned her into Eric's shotgun. I sawed off the barrel and stock of the shotgun with a hacksaw. It took a lot less time than I thought it would. I taped the butt of the shotgun with duct tape. Now I just have to test her. I also took [redacted]'s bomb apart, and I no [sic] know how to make more. I must reserve the motel for Denver today. Arlene looks so beautiful now. I also ordered a pistol belt and three ammunition pouches from the Internet. Everything is falling into place at last! Today, I also saw a program



on the History Channel about Charles Whitman, the Texas Sniper. He was an ex-Marine who killed his wife, mother, and a number of other people on August 1, 1966. This year will mark the 40th anniversary. (Castillo, 2006, p. 5)

Castillo had a strong obsession with Columbine and, in particular, with Eric Harris. At one point, he questioned his sexuality due to his feelings for Harris (*State v. Castillo*, 2010). He detailed copying Harris's look as well as his fascination with movies and television:

I will buy black cargo pants and black boots online to complete the uniform that Eric was wearing on April 20, 1999. I am feeling depressed these days. I drown my sadness and depression with work, cleaning, and movies. Still, it just keeps coming back. I am a TV junkie. I have been addicted to movies and television ever since I was born. (Castillo, 2006, p. 4)

Castillo displayed increasingly disturbing behavior before the event. He convinced his mother to take him to Columbine High School so he could visit. He bought a trench coat, which excited him because Harris had worn one during the Columbine shooting. His mother allegedly thought giving into the trip would make her son stop obsessing over Columbine. However, he did not stop obsessing, and eventually committed his own shooting on the birthday of school shooter Kip Kinkel (*State v. Castillo*, 2010).

#### **Case 4: Seung Hui Cho, age 23**

Seung Hui Cho committed a shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, killing 32 and wounded 17. The shooting started when the perpetrator killed two students in one

residence hall, and then returned to his dorm room. There, he deleted his Internet browser history, changed his clothes, mailed a multimedia manifesto NBC News (Langman, 2015c; Lankford, 2016c), and returned to campus. He chained shut the entrance doors to Norris Hall, leaving a bomb threat on the door. He then walked through the hall, shooting students and professors. The perpetrator committed suicide before police could capture him.

Cho had a history of psychiatric problems, including selective mutism and depression. He had several reports of harassment, as well as evidence showing ordered mental health treatment in December 2005. Before his rampage, Cho said he would die like Jesus and set an example for many.

Seung Hui Cho was an exceptionally quiet individual during his days at Virginia Tech, with teachers unsuccessfully trying to get him to talk (Hicok, 2006). He did send out various forms of communications before the shooting. Some of his teachers believed he was very depressed and suggested he see a counselor (Roy, 2005). Several times, Cho found himself in trouble with campus police for harassing female students, as well as sending a message to another student stating he was thinking about killing himself. When police arrived and to question him, he stated he was joking (Lucas, 2005). Sent to a hospital for mental health evaluation, he received a diagnosis of a possible “mood disorder or depression” (Carilion Health System, 2005, p. 24).

Cho wanted to be a writer, authoring several stories before and during his time at Virginia Tech that disturbed others. One professor removed him from her class due to his

strange behavior and yelling at his professor (Langman 2016a). The following is a passage from one of his stories:

I hate him. Must kill Dick. Must kill Dick. Dick must die. Kill Dick...Richard McBeef. What kind of name is that? What an asshole name. I don't like it. And look at his face. What an asshole face. I don't like his face. What an asshole face. I don't like his face at all. You don't think I could kill you, Dick? You don't think I can kill you? Got one eye...Got the other eye. (Cho, n.d.)

Cho's writing upset other students and the professors. He displayed evidence of a severe personality disorder and/or mood disorder. According to professors at Virginia Tech, he made little eye contact in class, spoke very little, and displayed almost no emotion (Langman, 2016d). In addition, his behavior in class prompted two English faculty members—Cheryl Ruggiero and Lucinda Roy—to conduct a private meeting with Cho. Notes taken by Cheryl reveal the following:

I am struck immediately by Seung Cho's physical aspect—he has a choice of seating, the chair opposite mine close to Lucinda's desk or the sofa, and he chooses the sofa, as far as possible from either of us—understandable. When I'm introduced and shake his hand, his hand is very sweaty and remains straight, does not clasp my hand.

When he sits, his arms are splayed unnaturally down at his sides, on the armrest and a pillow, open, stiff, hands not resting on the surfaces. He hardly moves at all, his face or his body, either when listening or speaking.

He wears a baseball cap pulled very low and reflective sunglasses. His voice is so very low that it's difficult to hear. Throughout, Cho's responses come more slowly than in a normal conversation, and most are monosyllables—"no, yeah, sure." I've indicated some places where there are even more strikingly long pauses before he responds. (Ruggiero, 2005, p. 6)

In the manifesto he submitted to NBC News, Cho made it evident that he had strong negative views of society:

Congratulations. You have succeeded in extinguishing my life. Vandalizing my heart wasn't enough for you. Raping my soul wasn't enough for you. Committing emotional sodomy on me wasn't enough for you. Every single second wasted on your wanton hedonism and menacing sadism could have been used to prevent today. Ask yourselves, What was I doing all this time? All these months, hours, seconds. Only if you could have been the victim of your crimes. Only if you could have been the victim. (Cho, 2007, p. 6)

Cho expressed hatred toward people with money, as well as many other groups. He included a handdrawn "88" in his multimedia manifesto, numbers that can signify "Heil Hitler" to Nazis. He also talked negatively about other groups, using derogatory names:

You love to pretend to, but you Hedonists, Charlatans, Sadists, Rapists, Terrorists will never know the feelings of giving up your lives for a cause. You have never felt a single ounce of pain in your hedonistic lives. You will never give up a single can of your Bud Light, a shot of your cognac, or a half-drop of your own

precious blood for another human being, only fuck the shit out of him and lie afterwards. You fucked us, now we fuck you, now we kill you. There can be no lighter penalty for Masqueraded Democratic Terrorists who commit unforgivable acts of treason against mankind. There is nowhere in the world you can run, you Lovers of Terrorism. There is nowhere in the world you can hide, you Lovers of Sadism. You will never know when and where the Weak and Defenseless that you fucked will strike—day, night, at school, in the public, in your home, during your most comfortable hour and protected place. You will never know how we will kill you—slash your throat, bullet in your back, torture you with knives, hammers, bolt cutters, scissors. You will always live in fear. You will never be able to go to school or work or rest or sleep. Your heart will always pound nonstop. Your sin-ridden soul will slowly eat up your conscious for the heinous crimes you have committed. (Cho, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Cho caused trouble on campus before the shooting. He harassed students and teachers during school, took photos of people without their permission, and received a visit from the police after sending a suicidal message to his roommate. When professors asked about the unwanted photographs, Cho said he did take photos as a hobby (Ruggiero, 2005).

Cho expressed violent tendencies in his communications, even before the release of his manifesto. He wrote one story about wanting to kill an abusive stepfather, and another about an old man who stole teenagers' winnings from a casino. In response to one of his writings, a professor sent him the following message:

Your paper of October 10 is disturbing to me.

From the beginning of this semester I have had the impression that you did not wish to be a part of this class. You usually have a ball cap pulled over your eyes as if you are asleep and when I have asked, as I did several times, for you to al [*sic*] least push it back a bit, you did not comply.

I am not sure why you enrolled in this class but I feel I am not being a help to you either through your writing or sparking your imagination.

If you would prefer some other creative writing professor I will be more than pleased to do all in my power to help you make the change even at this late date. If you feel you have enrolled in error I will be pleased to allow you to withdraw with no prejudice.

I think you need to consider whether or not you wish to continue with me and this class and if so please make time so that you and I can discuss what steps you will need to complete to be brought up to date. (Giovanni, 2005)

Cho made no mention of his family in his communications. What we do know is that he had an older sister who had been accepted to Princeton, and his mother and father were immigrants from Seoul, South Korea. Cho and his family came to the United States when he was around 8 years old (Ruggiero, 2005).

There is evidence of planning, as well as the presence of leakage behavior by Cho. Cho videotaped himself in the parking lot of a shooting range and referenced Columbine several times in his writings, saying he wanted to die like Eric and Dylan

(Cho, 2007). He bought two guns in February 2007 and March 2007, the latter a month before the shooting (Griffin, Meserve, Romans, & Sevanof, 2007).

Although Cho remained silent in many social situations, his manifesto revealed evidence of fame seeking. Cho referenced the Columbine killers and other mass murderers, making a statement about inspiring others, stating in his video manifesto to NBS News, “I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people... I set the example of the century for my Children to follow” Sent his self-made video and manifesto to NBC News (Cho, 2007; Langman, 2015b). Further, Cho identified his crime as retaliation for perceived wrongdoings:

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Can you feel the pain that you fucked us in, you Descendants of Satan? Well, can you feel it? All the shit you’ve given me, right back at you with hollow points. (Cho, 2007, pp. 2-4).

It is unknown exactly why Cho chose the date April 16, 2007. It might have been due to the fact that it was Holocaust Remembrance Day, or because he had an argument with a professor at Virginia Tech one year prior (Langman, 2018b).

#### **Case 5: Jared Lee Loughner, age 22**

Jared Loughner targeted U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011, while she was speaking outside a Safeway grocery store in Tucson, Arizona. Loughner had met Giffords four years prior at a community event, where he had asked her a question. He did not like her response and allegedly become enraged and obsessed with Giffords, even posting on a website his disdain for her. For the shooting, Loughner had armed himself with a pistol shot, shooting Giffords in the head before killing six and

injured 12 others. Individuals in the crowd tackled Loughner when he was reloading (FBI, 2011).

Loughner had experienced several setbacks prior to the shooting, having been fired from a job and endured a romantic breakup in 2005, after which he never had a girlfriend. He wanted to enlist in the military in 2008 but could not apply due to his drug use. Loughner had become increasingly withdrawn after the breakup and began to use drugs and drink alcohol. He also became notably withdrawn from peers and had little to no friends at the time of the shooting (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015). Several police reports from his time at college revealed citations for displaying disturbing behavior. He made comments in class that upset other students, talking about strapping bombs to babies in reaction to a poem about abortion (Pima County College Department of Public Safety, 2010).

Loughner displayed evidence of leakage behavior through a disturbing poem entitled “Vitriol Rhetoric” that discussed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (National Threat Assessment, 2015). In a postshooting interview, Loughner’s parents detailed his increasingly alarming behavior, which including uploading videos to YouTube in which he expressed discontent with the government. They also admitted he talked and laughed to himself frequently (Pima County Sheriff’s Department, 2010). Loughner remarked before the shooting that he wanted to fire 165 rounds in 1 minute and be on national television (Lankford, 2016c).

Before the shooting, Loughner expressed odd behavior, about which campus police received several calls. He became hostile in class after receiving a final grade of B



in his art class (Pima County Department of Public Safety, 2010). Before the shooting, Loughner's parents noticed he was becoming more prone to outbursts. Loughner reported one incident of drinking eight shots of vodka from his father's liquor cabinet, leading to charges for possession of alcohol as a minor. Following a mandatory mental health evaluation, Loughner received a diagnosis of depression. Doctors prescribed him medication, which he never took (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015). Along with depression, Loughner met the criteria for paranoid schizophrenia. He expressed paranoia and delusional thinking in one of his YouTube videos:

You're literate, listener?

If the property owners and government officials are no longer in ownership of their land and laws from a revolution then the revolutionary's from the revolution are in control of the land and laws.

The property owners and government officials are no longer in ownership of their land and laws from a revolution.

Thus, the revolutionary's from the revolution are in control of the land and laws. In conclusion, reading the second United States Constitution, I can't trust the current government because of the ratifications: The government is implying mind control and brainwash on the people by controlling grammar. (Classitup10, 2010)

Loughner expressed intense societal views about government, police, and the educational system:

The United States Department of Education is allowing unconstitutional education facility's to operate or the United States Department of Education is allowing free constitutional education facility's to operate. The United States Department of Education isn't allowing unconstitutional education facility's to operate. Thus, the United States Department of Education is allowing free constitutional education facility's to operate.

If the police remove you from the educational facility for talking then removing you from the educational facility for talking is unconstitutional in the United States. The police remove you from the educational facility for talking. Thus, removing you from the educational facility for talking is unconstitutional in the United States. This situation is fraud because the police are unconstitutional! Every police officer in the United States as of now is unconstitutionally working. Pima Community College police are police in the United States. Therefore, Pima Community College police are unconstitutionally working. The police are unconstitutionally working. (Classitup10, 2010b)

On his MySpace account, under the username "fallen asleep," Loughner posted hate-filled comments about killing cops and taking inspiration from Hitler:

10/13/10 - 05:37PM - THE APPLICATION ARE [sic] ILLEGAL BECAUSE IT BROKE THE BILL BECAUSE OF RIGHTS!

10/13/10 - 05:37PM - BE CAREFUL WITH POLICE BECAUSE THEY'RE ILLEGAL [sic]!

10/13/10 - 05:38PM - I don't feel good with fraud from the local police and from pima college!!

10/27/10 - 07:54PM - That Top Secret Info Is Not Known To the Public!

11/16/10 - 04:07PM - Ok! So in two wars with an illegal currency, it's hard for me to find a girlfriend!

11/17/10 - 05:18PM- Wow!! I'm fucking dead to everyone! Two dead pigs on the fuckin side of the street.

11/17/10 - 05:20PM - On my back, I have two bullets that are 9 mm's fuckin dope! I'm going to get a gun on my back with a black widow.

11/22/10 - 02:24PM - My school was fraud! They don't allow freespeech, and I'm concered [sic] it's genocide!

11/23/10 - 04:36PM - BE VERY FUCKIN CAREFUL WITH WHAT YOU SAY ON THIS FUCKING THING! THE PIGS ARE WATCHING: CIA!

11/23/10 - 04:36PM - THE FBI AND CIA IS WATCHING YOU FOR RIOTING!

12/09/10 - 10:56AM - I'm police brutality.

12/09/10 - 11:10AM- I KNOW YOUR WATCHING ME PIGS!

12/09/10 - 11:10AM- WOW! ICAN'T FIND A FRIEND! FUCK THE POLICE FOR SCAMMING EDUCATION!

12/10/10 - 11:10AM - FUCK YOU PIG!

12/10/10 - 12:09PM- i'm done with this because the police bugged myspace. (Loughner, 2010)

In his MySpace posts, Loughner referred to his suspension from Pima County College for making resentful YouTube videos. Administrators removed him from school, his return conditional on receiving a mental health evaluation, which he he refused. Prior to his dismissal, Loughner had yelled at a professor and asked if he was getting paid to brainwash students (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015).

Loughner's relationship with his parents had also begun to decline. He purchased a shotgun, which his parents hid from him. They also disabled his car because they did not want him to go out at night (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015; Pima County Sheriff's Department, 2010). Loughner also became increasingly irritable and violent at home, with his mother reporting he had pointed a shotgun at her (Pima County Sheriff's Department, 2010).

Loughner displayed leakage as well as fame-seeking behavior before the January 2011. He bragged about having 9mm bullets tattooed on his back. He wrote on various forums and online sites about killing cops, and also referenced that something criminal that might occur in the future. His first reference states: "I CAN'T WAIT FOR SOEMTHING FUCKIN HUGE!" (Loughner, 2010, p. 37). More specifically, he later wrote:

"WOW! I'm glad i didn't kill myself. I'll see you on National T.v! This is a foreshahow [*sic*]...why doesn't anyone talk to me?. . . I HAVE THIS HUGE GOAL AT THE END OF MY LIFE: 165 Rounds fired in a minute!" (Loughner, 2010, p. 36).

Loughner earned his spot on national television on January 8, 2011.

**Case 6: Adam Lanza, age 20**

Adam Lanza committed a school shooting on December 12, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Before the shooting, Lanza shot and killed his mother, Nancy, in their Newtown home. The perpetrator then drove to the elementary school, where he shot and killed 26 and wounded two: 20 second-grade students and six teachers and administrators. After the tragedy, he committed suicide by a gunshot to the head (Wombacher, Herovic, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2018).

Lanza had a history of psychological, social, and physiological troubles starting from birth. As an infant, he went to the hospital due to sleep apnea. When Lanza was in his toddler years, he underwent evaluation for not meeting his milestone stages of development. He created his own language, did not make eye contact with others, hit the sides of his head when he became angry, and did not like the feel of many textures against his skin. He also disliked being held or touched. He had difficulty in school, moving from school to school as a result (Scheper-Hughes, 2018).

Over the years, Lanza behaved strangely in school, with his mother eventually opting to home school him. Following many medical and psychological evaluation, Lanza received a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. From then on, Lanza attended school only for events.

Lanza posted on social media websites and forums, inquiring about guns and weapons. He began to withdraw completely, ultimately staying in his downstairs bedroom with very little interaction with his mother (Langman, 2015c). In the months leading up to his homicidal rampage, he posted online about his obsession with school

shootings and remarked how people would gain fans for committing such shootings. When arrested for public drunkenness prior to the shooting, he begged police to shoot him so he could become famous (Lankford, 2016b).

Lanza struggled with many issues related to mental health. He exhibited mood swings, which he referenced in online forum posts:

I hate going through these extremely rare instances of wild mood swings that I have. I think this was the only time this year for me. I was as depressed as I get during my last post, and I'm fine with the interminable depression that I normally have, but now I'm incoherently giddy with glee. Well, relative to my baseline . . . Except now that I'm giddy, I can't really say that I hate it because I think everything is delightful.

If depressives cut themselves to feel better, I wonder what cutting a happy-go-lucker [*sic*] would do. Santa's supposed to be jolly. I hope he visits me tonight so I can find out. (Lanza, 2011)

He also spoke about antidepressants on an online forum, as well as his distaste for psychiatrists. He believed that it was not natural to medicate people:

What is "chemical imbalance" even supposed to mean? Why don't hunter-gatherers need antidepressants? I swear, a psychiatrist could take a perfectly fine chimpanzee away from its jungle, confine it in captivity, and when the chimp gets depressed, and when the chimp gets depressed, they would say, "This chimpanzee has a chemical imbalance. What? A correlation between enculturation and

depression? But culture brings us meaning and beauty. Get out of my way, caveman-wannabe. I need to prescribe this chimp some Xanax.” (Lanza, n.d.)

Lanza was reportedly very antisocial and spent much of his time online. In addition to the autism diagnosis, he may have a personality disorder (FBI, 2012; Scheper-Hughes, 2018). He hated sunlight and going outdoors:

On another tangent, what do you think about sunlight? Those drapes haven’t been opened in the last five years, and the drapes in the room I’m in right now have actually been taped shut (to block the gaps from allowing sunlight through) for the same amount of time. I absolutely hate sunlight, along with any artificial light which resembles it.

The few times I see an extremely bleak, dark, and dreary day outside during the morning or afternoon with thick gray clouds covering the entire sky, I get into a good mood and think about how wonderfully beautiful it is outside. Bright, sunny, “cheerful” days are depressing. Nearly every afternoon is miserable for me. Beyond just the normal animosity I have for sunlight, I get exhausted between noon and sunset when I’m in a room which allows the slightest amount of afternoon light in. (Lanza, 2010)

Lanza struggled in school, beginning with significant language delays when he was younger. He had an individualized education plan and moved from school to school rather frequently. While Lanza made little mention of school in his writings, he related a strong point of view about teachers:

The power trips that you describe are going to be so prominent because of the entire philosophy behind education: the brutal indoctrination of pristine minds so as to propagate some delusional system of cultural values. (Lanza, 2011)

Nearly 6 feet tall and weighing 112 pounds, he was extremely underweight. He compiled a list of reasons why it was good to remain thin. At one time he had aspired to be a Marine like his grandfather, but his mother told him it would never happen due to his stature and demeanor. He was reportedly very distraught over this declaration, leading some to speculate this was the reason for his familial discord with his mother (Langman, 2017a)

Lanza referred to a psychotic episode in his writings, identifying this as possibly his first experience with an instance of paranoia:

Getting back to the subject of paranoia — those images were the worst “hallucinations” I had experienced until a couple of weeks ago late one night when I was getting very tired. The incident was so surreal that I only remember a small amount of the details. Basically, I began to “see” many different things. Although I knew that none of it was actually real, it came as close to being real as it could for me without it being physically tangible. I heard screaming around me, and I had an overwhelming sense that there was someone dead behind me. I kept seeing silhouettes of flickering people everywhere. I felt like I had to cry. The entire ordeal persisted for about fifteen minutes and sort of faded away. Prior to it happening, I had never had that sort of delusional hysteria before. It was possibly the strangest thing I’ve ever experienced. (Lanza, 2010)



Lanza had many strong opinions about society. His writings revealed the recurring themes of pedophilia, murder, and rape, including a justification for pedophilia:

Why is this society so adamantly opposed to pedophilia? Children deserve all of the rights and respects that an adult should receive, yet this is not the case to any extent. The inexorable battery of children (“spanking”) is fully legal in the United States. Children’s free will is suppressed and annihilated in every conceivable manner within families. Beyond having their associations, location, and every action subject to their parents’ wills, they are denied their own thoughts, opinions, values, and religion, and instead are coerced into adopting their parents’. Within the rest of society, children are denied property (their parents instantly legally siphon it from their children’s domain regardless of how the child obtained it), employment, and are denied the right to have even a token impact on the government which innately subjugates them through its very existence (although I’ll spare you from my anarchistic rhetoric in this post). Children are not even allowed to control their own bodies: if an adult wants to force any medical procedures or treatments onto a child, the child does not have any choice in the matter. (Lanza, 2010)

In addition to this commentary, he also related his thoughts on culture and religion:

You’re a Christian. Religion, being cultural, inherently subjugates. That whole “dishonor” fatuity. Something is “dishonorable” not because it lacks virtue, but because it goes against their “authority.” All they’re doing is imposing their will

on you. You submit to the notion of culture, which your parents forced onto you.

(Lanza, n.d.).

He wrote more about relationships, also hinting at a fascination with serial killers:

Relationships have absolutely no physical aspect to me: all that matters is communication. The nature of the internet fosters this. Early on, you referenced serial killing multiple times in ways people normally don't. That immediately appealed to me. I have an affinity for people whom I perceive as being abused, and consummate scorn for the abusers. It was probably the primary enabling factor. The way you are relentlessly treated by these humans is obscenely offensive to me, so every time they would do it, it would simultaneously increase my sympathy for you and increase my resentment for all of them. My wrath for them fostered more of a negative atmosphere, which would cause you to be even more of a respite from their depravity. It was self-perpetuating. (Lanza, n.d.).

Lanza's reasoning for or motivation behind the December 2012 attack remain unknown. He did leave behind several opinions about mass murder on websites, as well as his obsession with mass murder in general. He also referenced a prior school shooter, Wayne Lo, who committed a school shooting exactly 20 years before him, and mentioned the Columbine shooters by their nicknames:

And it's glib to dismiss them as not being indicative of anything just because there have been over a thousand of them instead of over a hundred thousand, or however many you think are necessary, because mass murdering is so ridiculously over-the-top of a response that very few people are prone to do it under any

circumstances. But just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers “not just the Reb & VoDkA bunch,” and beyond these fans are countless more people who can sympathize with them; and beyond these are millions more who never think of relating the circumstances of their lives to anyone else but instead just go through the motions of life incessantly dissatisfied with their environment. (Lanza, 2012)

Additionally, Lanza made comments referring to fame and mass murder, among them “Serial killers are lame. Everyone knows that mass murderers are the cool kids” (Lanza, 2011), and “ People who kill have many reasons and motivations, they are motivated by perverse urges which overcome them. They are sick in the head that is for sure, but they are not evil” (Lanza, 2010).

#### **Case 7: Geddy Lee Kramer, age 19**

Geddy Lee Kramer committed a mass attack at a FedEx facility in Kennesaw, Georgia, on April 29, 2014. He shot and wounded six people before committing suicide. He had wanted to commit a school shooting on April 19, the anniversary of Columbine; however, that date was on a Saturday). Kramer left behind a suicide note offering a small explanation for his actions. The FedEx shooter connected violence with his desire to make a name for himself, stating, “Maybe a part of this is also the fact that a life lived in infamy is better than just another nobody” (“Geddy Lee Kramer,” n.d.; Vissner, 2014).

Very little material about Geddy Lee Kramer is public. His suicide note, left at the scene of the incident, provided most of what I learned about the shooter. In its entirety, the note read:

This wasn't the result of me snapping. Well maybe it was. But not like "you know what [censored] it I'LL KILL EVERYONE. "It was more of a several month snap. Slow and steady. This was the result of my own issues; mental instability, depression, frustration, sexual isolation. I know I shouldn't complain. I've got a comfortable place to sleep. Warm food. But the fact that the field of nothingness and \*unconscienceness [note in margins: I'm too lazy to look words up] awaits me if I put a 12 gauge shell in my brain is appealing. But know this, this wasn't a result of media brainwashing and subliminal messages. This is my own doing. I'm a sociopath. I want to hurt people. Maybe a part of this is also the fact that a life lived in infamy is better than just another nobody. This is not anyone's fault but mine. Mine. If my self-esteem was at a point other than negative and I grew a pair to actually get myself laid, maybe I'd be alive now. I'm in my happy place. I'm in my happy place. I'm in my happy place. ("Geddy Lee Kramer," n.d)

In Kramer's own words, he suffered from "mental instability, depression, frustration, sexual isolation" ("Geddy Lee Kramer," n.d). He had no luck with the medication he was given. His mother, Tracy Kramer was arrested after driving drunk and crashing her car. Kramer talked very little to his father, and they would communicate via text messages, even when he was in the house (Judd, n.d.).

In this note, Kramer touched on psychosocial aspects, along with depression and sexual frustration, stating that he viewed himself as a sociopath. He alluded to an interest in bondage and fantasized about hurting girls. He saw his lack of sexual activity as a sign he was not a man. In school, he had no friends and isolated himself (Judd, n.d.).

Kramer's journal shows evidence that he planned to commit a Columbine-like attack at his high school which never occurred. He was obsessed with the 1999 attack and wrote about using the school shooting as a school project. Although he was only 4 years old when the Columbine school shooting occurred, he had become fascinated with it. He referred to Klebold and Harris as heroes, claiming their only crime was not being able to kill more people (Judd, n.d.).

Kramer's attack at his place of work appeared to be a result of his frustration with several aspects of life and his desire for infamy. While he did not allude to paranoid thinking or delusions in his writings, he did make a list of classmates whom he wanted to kill. On April 29, 2014, Kramer carried a shotgun into the Georgia FedEx facility, where he shot and wounded six workers before killing himself.

#### **Case 8: Elliot Rodger, age 22**

Elliot Rodger committed a mixed mass murder on May 23, 2014, beginning at the University of Santa Barbara in Isla Vista, California. Prior to heading into town, Rodger stabbed to death his roommates and their friend. On his spree, he murdered three more people and injured 14. He used a firearm for some of the attacks and struck others with his BMW. Before driving to the sorority for his campus attack, Rodger uploaded a YouTube video entitled "Elliot Rodger's Retribution." He also emailed a manifesto called *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* to his life coach, his parents, and some acquaintances. Rodger had a history of social problems in school, as well as problems with anger (Allely & Faccini, 2017).

Of the 12 perpetrators I studied, Rodger wrote the longest manifesto. Over 137 pages, Rodger covered his life from birth until death in one single communication. Rodger wrote about several topics that revealed him to be mentally distraught. The one failure that seemed to upset him most was being a virgin:

I realized that I would be a virgin forever, condemned to suffer rejection and humiliation at the hands of women because they don't fancy me, because their sexual attractions are flawed. They are attracted to the wrong type of male. I always mused to myself that I would rather die than suffer such an existence, and I knew that if it came to that, I would exact my revenge upon the world in the most catastrophic way possible. At least then, I could die knowing that I fought back against the injustice that has been dealt to me. (Rodger, n.d., p. 101)

Rodger suffered from depression, in addition to a possible mood disorder. He described feelings of jealousy and envy many times throughout his manifesto:

By nature, I am a very jealous person, and at the age of nine my jealous nature sprung to the surface. During playdates with James, sometimes he would have other friends over as well, and I would feel very jealous and upset when he paid more attention to them. Feeling left out, I would find a quiet corner and start crying. My mother and Kim were very understanding and did the best they could to console me. On the rare occurrence that my mother would have Maddy and Mo over for dinner, or if we would go to visit them at their house, Maddy often played with my little sister Georgia instead of me, and this too made me jealous. I remember all the times I cried when this happened. Jealousy and envy. . . those

are two feelings that would dominate my entire life and bring me immense pain. The feelings of jealousy I felt at nine-years-old were frustrating, but they were nothing compared to how I would feel once I hit puberty and have to watch girls choosing other boys over me. Any problem I had at nine-years-old was nirvana compared to what I was doomed to face. (Rodger, n.d., p. 16)

Rodger revealed failed efforts about trying to fit in and wanting attention from his classmates and peers, as well as battling with extreme self-consciousness:

When I arrived at school the next day, I was intensely nervous. Before class started, I stood in a corner frantically trying to figure out how I would go about revealing this to everyone. Trevor was the first one to notice it, and he came up to me and patted my head, saying that it was very “cool.” Well, that was exactly what I wanted. My new hair turned out to be quite a spectacle, and for a few days I got a hint of the attention and admiration I so craved. (Rodger, 2014, p. 18)

Born in England, Rodger recalled coming to America when he was 5 years old. He stated that his first real friend was a girl, which was ironic, as later he would struggle with having relationships with girls. Rodger related having good memories until around age 7, when his parents told him they would be getting a divorce. He also recalled 9 years old being very tough because he was short for his age. He discussed his attempts at trying to socialize:

I remained very shy during my Sixth Grade year, and I would always be labeled as a quiet kid. I wasn't able to establish any friends that I could have playdates

with, so the only playdates I had was with old friends from Topanga Elementary. This filled in the social void, and I was content with it.

I tried my best to improve my social situation during school time. A few girls continued to pay attention to me, saying hi as I walked by them and occasionally giving me hugs, but I felt bitter at the fact that I wasn't able to truly hang out with them like the popular boys were doing. (Rodger, n.d., p. 30)

Rodger specifically and intensely described negative feelings toward a family member, which resulted in a desire to kill. He talked about being jealous of his own brother and he believed killing him was his only option to keep his sibling from becoming more popular than him:

I had an argument with Soumaya [Rodger's stepmother] while I was visiting father's house. It started when she began to boast that my brother Jazz was recently signed by an agent to act in T.V. commercials. She said that by the time he is my age, he will be a successful actor. I talked about how Jazz was already so socially savvy for his age, and how I've always envied him for it. She told me he will never have any problems with girls and will lose his virginity while he's young. I had to sit there and listen to the bitch tell me that my little brother will grow up enjoying the life I've always craved for but missed out on. It is very unfair how some boys are able to live such pleasurable lives while I never had any taste of it, and now it has been confirmed to me that my little brother will become one of them. He will become a popular kid who gets all the girls. Girls will love



him. He will become one of my enemies. That was the day that I decided I would have to kill him on the Day of Retribution. (Rodger, n.d., p. 128)

He also described delusions of grandeur and often pointed out how different he was from everyone else:

I spent more time studying the world, seeing the world for the horrible, unfair place it is. I then had the revelation that just because I was condemned to suffer a life of loneliness and rejection, doesn't mean I am insignificant. I have an exceptionally high level of intelligence. I see the world differently than anyone else. Because of all of the injustices I went through and the worldview I developed because of them, I must be destined for greatness. I must be destined to change the world, to shape it into an image that suits me! (Rodger, n.d., p. 56)

Rodger held several views about society, many of them having to do with a distaste for wealthy people. Although Rodger had come from a family with money, he seemed to disregard this often, and blamed his parents for his unhappiness and lack of material objects:

I envied the cool kids, and I wanted to be one of them. I was a bit frustrated at my parents for not shaping me into one of these kids in the past. They never made an effort to dress me in stylish clothing or get me a good-looking haircut. I had to make every effort to rectify this. I had to adapt. (Rodger, n.d., p. 17)

He bought a significant number of lottery tickets, at one point spending over \$6,000 in an attempt to win the Mega Millions:

I believed that it was destiny for me to win the Megamillions [*sic*] Lottery, particularly this very jackpot. People win the lottery every single month, so why not me? I was meant to live a life of significance and extravagance. I was meant to win this jackpot. It was destiny. For the first few drawings I played, I spent \$50 to \$100 on tickets, but to my profound frustration I still didn't win, and the jackpot kept rising. This only increased my enthusiasm. I started to picture a whole new, perfect life for myself after I won. I imagined buying a beautiful, opulent mansion with an extravagant view, and acquiring a collection of supercars which I would use specifically to attract beautiful girls into my life. I planned to go back to college once I had bolstered myself with all this wealth, and lord myself over all the other students there, finally fulfilling my dream of being the coolest and most popular kid at school. As I sat meditating in my room, I imagined the ecstasy I would feel as scores of beautiful girls look at me with admiration as I drive up to college in a Lamborghini. Such an experience would make up for everything. I *had* to win this jackpot. (Rodger, n.d., p. 104)

Another one of his societal views involved a belief that African Americans were an inferior race:

How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves. I deserve it more. I tried not to believe his foul words, but they were already said, and it was hard to erase from my mind. If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl

at the age of thirteen while I've had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject ME? The injustice! (Rodger, n.d., p. 84)

Before committing his rampage attack, Rodger had several confrontations with the police. Of one incident, Rodger described being assaulted at a party; in the second incident, Rodger had made a citizen's arrest because he thought his roommate stole his candles (Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office, 2014). The third incident, 3 weeks before he committed the mass attack in Isla Vista, police came to his apartment to do a wellness check at the request of his parents, who were disturbed by some of his video posts on YouTube:

Apparently, someone saw my videos and became instantly suspicious of me. They called some sort of health agency, who called the police to check up on me. The police told me it was my mother who called them, but my mother told me it was the health agency. My mother had watched the videos and was very disturbed by them. I don't suppose I'll ever know the full truth of who called the police on me. The police interrogated me outside for a few minutes, asking me if I had suicidal thoughts. I tactfully told them that it was all a misunderstanding, and they finally left. If they had demanded to search my room. . . That would have ended everything. For a few horrible seconds I thought it was all over. When they left, the biggest wave of relief swept over me. It was so scary. (Rodger, n.d., p. 134)

Leading up to the attack, Rodger wrote in his manifesto about having sexual fantasies, along with dark fantasies of torturing and killing people:

Ever since my life took a very dark turn at the age of seventeen, I often had fantasies of how malevolently satisfying it would be to punish all of the popular kids and young couples for the crime of having a better life than me. I dreamed of how sweet it would be to torture or kill every single young couple I saw.

However, as I said previously in this story, I never thought I would actually go through with these drastic desires. I had hope inside me that I could one day have a happy life. (Rodger, n.d., p. 101)

Rodger expressed extreme animosity toward women many times in his writings. He also wrote about society, and how disgusted he had become with people. He cited his motivation for the “Day of Retribution” (his name for his plan) as getting revenge against anyone who has wronged him:

My orchestration of the Day of Retribution is my attempt to do everything, in my power, to destroy everything I cannot have. All of those beautiful girls I’ve desired so much in my life, but can never have because they despise and loathe me, I will destroy. All of those popular people who live hedonistic lives of pleasure, I will destroy, because they never accepted me as one of them. I will kill them all and make them suffer, just as they have made me suffer. It is only fair. (Rodger, n.d., p.137)

In preparation for this attack, Rodger mentioned purchasing a gun and going shooting. He identified the purchase as the first part of his plan:

My first act of preparation was the purchase my first handgun. I did this quickly and hastily, at a local gun shop called Goleta Gun and Supply. I had already done

some research on handguns, and I decided to purchase the Glock 34 semiautomatic pistol, an efficient and highly accurate weapon. I signed all of the papers and was told that my pickup day was in mid-December. That fell in nicely, because that was when I was planning on staying in Santa Barbara till. After I picked up the handgun, I brought it back to my room and felt a new sense of power. I was now armed. Who's the alpha male now, bitches? I thought to myself, regarding all of the girls who've looked down on me in the past. I quickly admired my new weapon before locking it up in my safe and preparing to go back to my hometown for the winter break. (Rodger, n.d., p. 113)

He uploaded several videos to YouTube before the attack, the final one posted just a few hours before the attack. He also described being scared of being caught before he could carry out this plan:

It was all because of the videos. I must have expressed too much anger in them. I immediately took most of them off of Youtube, and planned to reupload them a few days before the Day of Retribution. This incident made me realize that I needed to be extra careful. I can't let anyone become suspicious of me. All it takes is for one person to call the police and tell them that they think I'm going to perpetrate a shooting, and the police will be coming to my door again, demanding to search my room. For the next few days, I felt extremely fearful that they could show up anytime. I kept one of my handguns with a few loaded magazines near me just in case such a thing did happen. If they did show up, I would have to try to quickly shoot them all and escape out the back window. I would then have to

perform a hasty mockery of my plans, with the police on my tail. That will ruin everything. Thankfully, all suspicion of me was dropped after I took down the videos from Youtube, and the police never came back. (Rodger, n.d., p. 134)

Rodger mentioned wanting to have fame and to be known to make up for being shy throughout his life:

As middle school approached its ultimate end, I was having a miserable time there. I was extremely unpopular, widely disliked, and viewed as the weirdest kid in school. I had to act weird in order to gain attention. I was tired of being the invisible shy kid. Infamy is better than total obscurity. (Rodger, n.d., p. 42)

#### **Case 9: Christopher Harper-Mercer, age 26**

Christopher Harper-Mercer committed a mass shooting at Umpqua Community College on October 1, 2015, which resulted in nine deaths and seven wounded. Police arrived at the scene and exchanged gunfire with the shooter. He then returned to the classroom where he had begun shooting and committed suicide by gunshot to the head (Oregon State Police, 2015).

Harper-Mercer's mother noted that his behavior become increasingly strange right before the incident. She recalled him urinating in a bucket because he did not want to leave his room. He displayed extensive anger and resentment toward his parents, particularly his mother. He believed he was superior to others his age and expressed strong negative views about society. Harper-Mercer discussed his societal opinions openly on online forums, including expressing his opinion about Vester Flanagan, who

murdered a Roanoke, Virginia, newscaster and cameraman on live television (Langman, 2018).

Harper-Mercer maintained a digital manifesto in which he discussed admiration for Flanagan and other shooters, including Elliot Rodger, Seung-Hui Cho, and Adam Lanza (Langman, 2018). He also wrote about his frustrations at being a virgin (“Christopher Harper-Mercer,” n.d.). Making the connection between fame and killing, he commented that the more people he would kill, the more he would be in the limelight. (Lankford, 2016b).

Harper-Mercer displayed increasing anger and a difficulty connecting with people, both of which he viewed as failures. He outlined this in his manifesto, which he titled “My Story”:

My whole life has been one lonely enterprise. One loss after another. And here I am , 26, with no friends, no job, no girlfriend, a virgin. I long ago realized that society likes to deny people like me these things. People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. (Harper-Mercer, n.d.)

Prior to the Umpqua Community College shooting, Harper-Mercer displayed suicidal tendencies and had been hospitalized a few times. Interviewing his mother, police discovered he had attempted suicide to get out of the military (Oregon State Police, 2015).

Although Harper-Mercer did not write about his educational troubles, he attended a school for individuals with behavioral issues when he was younger. His mother reported he was not involved in social groups or activities during school, he got into

occasional fights, and had almost no friends. He got in trouble for throwing something at school (Oregon State Police, 2015). Harper-Mercer's mother believed he was angry at the world because he felt he could not fit in. In addition, he displayed features of a possible personality disorder:

People like Elliot Rodger, Vester Flanagan, The Columbine kids, Adam Lanza and Seung Cho. Just like me those people were denied everything they deserved, everything they wanted. Though we may have been born bad, society left us no recourse, no way to be good. I have been forced to align myself with demonic forces. What was once an involuntary relationship has now become an alignment, a service. I now serve the demonic Heirarchy. When I die will become one of them. A demon. And I will return to kill again and again. (Harper-Mercer, n.d.)

He also wrote about hatred for African Americans, particularly men, even though he himself was half African American. He referenced Elliot Rodger, who had similar thoughts regarding African Americans:

The black man is the most vile creature on the planet. He is a beast beyond measure. But don't take these words to be racist. I don't hate blacks. Just the men. Now of course some of you will be saying, wait, your 40 % black aren't you? Ah yes dear reader, I am, but thankfully my partial blackness didn't come from a man. If it had my brain would have been fried. It is the black male who is foolish. Black women are not to blame, they are hapless dupes to the black mans [sic] conniving machinations. Africa would be better off without the black man, they should be executed and the black queen should take over Africa. After all, it was



black men who made it inferior. Elliot Rodger was right when he said his thoughts on the black male. I fully agree with him. (Harper-Mercer, n.d.)

Harper-Mercer's parents divorced when he was young, after which he and his mother moved from Southern California to Northern California. After the divorce, he had no further involvement with his father (Oregon State Police, 2015). When her son was age 4 or 5 years, his mother recalled him opening the car door and trying to jump out in a possible suicide attempt. Although his father was from England and his mother worked as a nurse at a jail, he did not write about his family in his manifesto or blog.

Harper-Mercer displayed a tendency towards violence in his writings. In his manifesto, he urged others to incite violence, as well:

And just like me, there will be others, like Ted Bundy said, we are your sons, your brothers, we are everywhere. My advice to others like me is to buy a gun and start killing people. If you live in a country like Europe with strict gun laws, either pay the necessary fees/time to get a license or become a serial killer. The world could always use an additional serial killer. Butcher them in their homes, in the street, wherever you find them. Every country in the world should be a battleground. From the heart of Africa to the deepest depths of Asia blood will flow. Fear not the laws of man, when you get to the other side you will be welcomed. (Harper-Mercer, 2015)

Although he hated trends and anything deemed popular, Harper-Mercer wrote about several mass murderers and serial killers in his manifesto (Harper-Mercer, 2015). He posted in online forums about violence and told his mother that mass shooters should

“step up their game” (Oregon State Police, 2015, p. 46). Evidence of fame-seeking is present in his manifesto:

I write this manifesto so that others will know of my story and perhaps find some solace in it, some kind of inspiration for their own lives. It will contain various sections dealing with my life. It will be divided into sections based on different things. My whole life has been one lonely enterprise. One loss after another. And here I am , 26, with no friends, no job, no girlfriend, a virgin. I long ago realized that society likes to deny people like me these things. People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. People like Elliot Rodger, Vester Flanagan, The Columbine kids, Adam Lanza and Seung Cho. (Harper-Mercer, n.d.)

In a particular entry in his blog, Harper-Mercer discussed notoriety and mass killings. He wrote again about Flanagan, a man who killed a reporter and cameraman on live television:

On an interesting note, I have noticed that so many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more your're [*sic*] in the limelight. (Harper-Mercer, 2015)

Harper-Mercer's mother believed her son had planned the event at least days in advance, because he was not an impulsive person. She viewed the act a “culmination of

his frustration from his loneliness and anger (Oregon State Police, 2015). Additional comments in his manifesto alluded to preparation:

So, in conclusion this is my manifesto. I hope all who have read it enjoyed it and find inspiration in it. Learn from what I've done. I know this is not as long as Elliot Rodgers but its still good. Elliot is a god. For those wondering, I do not have any social media. If anything should happen to this manifesto on this hard drive there is a original copy on my computer. For the Vestor Flanagans, Elliot Rodgers, Seung Cho, Adam Lanzas of the world, I do this. For all those who never took me seriously this is for you. For all those who haven't made their stand I do this. I am the martyr for all those like me. To quote Seung Cho, "Today I die like Jesus Christ." (Harper-Mercer, n.d.)

#### **Case 10: Jesse Osborne, age 14**

Jesse Osborne committed a school shooting on September 28, 2016, at Townville Elementary School in South Carolina. Prior to the attack, Osborne shot and killed his father at home. Osborne's planning and preparation resulted in the murder of his father, the killing of a 6-year-old boy, and the wounding of three others. In the midst of the attack, Osborne reported loading the wrong ammunition into his gun, causing it to jam. He threw down his gun and start yelling, at which point police apprehended him (State of South Carolina, 2016).

When interviewed by the police, Osborne told them to stay away from true crime communities, which he felt should be shut down if they police come across one (Langman, 2016b). He had bragged to others in a true crime community-related

Instagram chat that he wanted to shoot more people than Adam Lanza had (Langman, 2016b). He purportedly wanted to shoot “at least 50” and to be one of the youngest mass murderers in history. (Osborne is the youngest shooter in this study.)

In his police interview, Osborne revealed wanting to end his life. He also talked about his conflict-filled relationship with his father. This, he claimed, had angered him so badly that he murdered his father before his attack at the elementary school:

FEMALE OFFICER: When you went to the school, what was your intent? I mean what-

OSBORNE: To end my life.

FEMALE OFFICER: — you expect to happen?

OSBORNE: To end my life. The fighting.

FEMALE OFFICER: And shoot other people too at the same time?

OSBORNE: At that time, yes. I was just, because of all the anger in my body that I just killed my father. (State of South Carolina, 2016, p. 18)

Osborne mentioned having trouble with his parents and suffering from anxiety. He stated he would spend time with his pet rabbit when he felt anxious. He reported being angry with his father the night before the shooting to the point where he retrieved a gun and loaded it that same night:

Well, last night, my dad was fussing to me and my mom about not getting paid enough for his chicken houses. And he was getting up in my face and stuff. And whenever he's drunk, he always like says he wants to fight me because I make this face to him. And he'll — and then my mom will have to step in and get

fussed at too. And then this morning, he got the paycheck, and then he just went off. And I hadn't finished my math homework, and he also got mad about that; but I was working on ELA. So — and that's the point where I went into his drawer and loaded his gun and —. (State of South Carolina, 2016, pp. 7-8)

Osborne was closer to his grandparents than his parents, and called them after the shooting to tell them what he did:

But I threw them down at one of the back entrances with a camera. And I just called my grandfather. And then once the cop got there, just threw the phone on the ground. And I think he could still hear because he got there immediately. He was like, "I'm sorry that this happened to you." (State of South Carolina, 2016, p. 16)

Osborne had had behavioral problems in school prior to the shootings, having once brought an ax and machete to school. After that, officers arrested him and told him to see a therapist:

FEMALE OFFICER: So you didn't really have personal animosity against any one at the school?

OSBORNE: I just had a problem with the school.

FEMALE OFFICER: With the school.

OSBORNE: Yeah.

FEMALE OFFICER: The school system?

OSBORNE: Yeah, basically.

FEMALE OFFICER: That the only school recently that you've thought about shooting? Or is there —

OSBRONE: No. The one that I brought the ax and machete to, I thought about that. That was West Oak. And I got arrested, went to Columbia, got in a school. I was supposed to see a therapist soon. That might actually have stopped me from doing this. The therapist wouldn't ever call so.

FEMALE OFFICER: Really?

OSBORNE: Yeah. That probably would have helped me too. Are you in any sort of juvenile probation or --

OSBORNE: I'm on probation. Yeah. (State of South Carolina, 2016, pp. 16-17).

Osborne did not leave behind many writings. What little there is comes from his Instagram chat, which provided evidence the shooter planned the event ahead of time. It is also apparent that Osborne was aware of other mass murderers, such as Adam Lanza, and had researched police response times. He stated in the chat that he had been planning for two years to commit a shooting. He also related plans to kill his father and steal his keys. In a chat dated September 16–22, 2016, he made the following comments:

Getting one of these soon I saved up \$2000 and im going to buy this and a tec9 also known as a ab10 and hopefully gonna but some extra mags for it. Damn police response time is [redacted] where i live. It tskes [*sic*] them 15 mins to get here then about and [*sic*] hour to breach XD weaklings. I HAVE TO BEAT ADAM LAZA (Lanza) DOE. Atleast 40 [*sic*]. (Osborne, 2016)

Osborne had also performed a Google search on “youngest mass murderer” and researched Columbine. After bringing a machete to school and being suspended, Osborne told his psychologist that he wanted to kill the bullies at school. Osborne wrote “you’ll see me on the news” in his Instagram chat, on which he had the username “kmosh\_kmfdm\_nbk\_.” Originally titled *Kein Mehrheit Für Die Mitleid*, KMFDM was a German industrial band that released an album on the date of the Columbine shooting, something Harris acknowledged in his journal; NBK was the name Harris and Klebold gave their attack (Jefferson County, Colorado, Sheriff, 2000).

Osborne had become obsessed with Columbine after hearing a song mentioning Columbine and asking his father what it was about (Cox, 2018). He would frequently go on Instagram and chat with people all over the world about committing school shootings. Osborne had chosen the name “Project Rainbow” for his attack and posted a photo on Instagram of the shirt he had made with the name (State of South Carolina, 2016).

#### **Case 11: Randy Stair, age 24**

Randy Stair, who also went by the pseudonym “Andrew Blaze,” committed a shooting at a Weis Supermarket in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, on June 8, 2017. Stair shot and killed three people at the supermarket and subsequently committed suicide. Stair authored a minibiography about his early years, found after his death. In the writing, he admitted that he wanted to be well known and liked. He had become obsessed with cartoons and other types of movies and films, and imagined himself as a cartoon character.

He wrote about being very shy and withdrawn as a child (Stair, 2016, 2017). Stair also recalled his dislike at being acknowledged by teachers or other children at school. He described a school play that made him upset and had a strong emotional impact (Stair, n.d.-a). Stair was obsessed with Columbine and posted about it on different social media platforms. In one of his YouTube videos, he declared that Weis Markets was officially Columbine (HeyGuy4321, 2017).

Stair wrote in his journal about being extremely depressed since 2012 and planning his death about a year after that. He chronicled some of his thoughts in a document called "Please Read" (Stair, n.d.-b), including those about depression and suicide:

I've been conspiring to end my life for at least 4 1/2 years. During the bad luck streak in early 2013 was when it fully ignited. Ever since then it's been a slow downward spiral of indescribable stress and depression. However, it was during all of this chaos that I slowly began to discover who I truly was. (Stair, n.d.-b)

School was not a happy time for Stair. He recalled experiencing embarrassment during a school play and being very quiet in school. He mentioned a few incidents in his life that occurred all around the same time, having a negative impact on him and affecting his depression:

I fell down an abysmal hole of depression in 2013 and I never climbed back out. One bad thing kept happening another after another. I totaled my car in February 2013 (brother totaled his 10 days later). At the end of the year my iMac's graphic card fried and my hard drive failed simultaneously, costing \$700 to repair. I can't



remember everything that happened but those were the worst moments of 2013. It was one of those years where virtually nothing went right, especially for YouTube videos. In March/April of 2013 was when the “Ember” thing started; by mid-2014 she was everywhere on my social media. I talk about all of this in the suicide tapes. (Stair, n.d.-b)

Stair may have had a personality disorder, as evidenced by delusions in which he believed he spoke with characters he created for his YouTube channel:

As I write this in May 2017, nothing matters to me anymore except my girls. I knew I was one of them by the end of 2015. Everything about the “EGS” ghosts just felt so familiar and was far beyond coincidental. It’s where I’ve been sent from. Mackenzie, Rachael, Harmony, Froggy, Sidney, Alex, Celesta, Matilda, Madison, etc, are all real souls; they’ve all lived and died on this planet.

Mackenzie talks to me all the time; she’s my eternal soul mate. We’re destined to be together until the end of time. . .and she’s always been there for me. . .it just took me 24 years to realize it. (Stair, n.d.-b)

Like many of his predecessors in this study who committed mass murder, Stair had a strong dislike of society and expressed this view in his journal:

The way I see that she saw things was I was afraid to put myself out there and to reach for my maximum potential, when in reality I despised the human race and wanted to blow up the entire planet. (Stair, n.d.-a)

There is no evidence that Stair was involved in any criminal activity prior to his death. However, in his social media outlets, which included multiple accounts on Twitter,

Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, Stair posted videos alluding to violence. Stair alluded to “Westborough High Massacre,” an animated video that portrayed a school shooting, by posting about it on Twitter and Instagram (HeyGuy4321, 2017).

Stair was obsessed with Columbine and posted about it on different social media platforms. Stair referred to Columbine a great deal and had a fascination with Eric Harris, which he wrote about in his journal. He made shirts with “Natural Selection” on the front, like the one Harris wore during the shootings; the back of his shirt read “Remember Columbine” with the date of that attack. He also wrote about his desire to inspire other people to copy what he did:

I hope I inspire more shootings, big or small. This is pretty small scaled but alone it's decent. That order better be decent that night. I need pallets to block those fucking doors, man! I hope Weis loses 50-75% of its customers after this and goes out of business there. I hope people feel uneasy and vulnerable in there after this. As of right now... Weis Markets is officially Columbine High School. (Stair, 2017, p. 228)

Stair expressed a significant amount of anger and frustration. He stated that he was a female trapped in a man's body. He renamed himself “Andrew Blaze” and wrote about darkness:

It can all be traced back to dealing with people dying. In 2013 I lost my great grandfather, got word Matt Murray (college classmate) died a week and a half after winter break started (December 2012), and was still scarred from the death of Tom Lynch from the previous winter (a kid who was about to graduate a grade

below me). In total there were six deaths that occurred from 2012 through 2013; four of these were kids younger than 21, and I knew three out of the four. (Stair, n.d.-b, p. 1)

As far as Randy's motivation for the shooting, he wrote about his hatred for the human race, lack of a girlfriend, and his difficulty making friends:

Throughout my entire life I never had a girlfriend, nor did I ever go out on a single date. I never had the desire or the urge to be in relationships; I hated making friends in general. By the end of high school I was just done with attempting to make friends. By the end of college I despised the human race. 2016 and 2017 have been full of almost nothing but hatred towards humans. I wanted to kill as many people as I could. (Stair, n.d.-b, p. 2)

Stair admitted to planning the attack months in advance. He also noted creating many video files for his fans to view after his death:

To answer an extremely important question, I'm not just ending my life; I will be ending the lives of others as well. Be on the lookout on WNEP.com for headlines pertaining to "Tunkhannock." I've been planning to do this for at least three to four months. I documented the entire process on both video and audio recordings. These recordings are viewable in this digital set; it's all in the "Andrew Blaze Suicide Tapes" folder. Private journal entries dating back to November 2016 are also included (located in the "Andrew Blaze Private Journal" folder). I literally documented the final months of my life on paper, video, and audio

recordings. . .The creator. . .of “EGS Tapes” . . .recorded their own tapes. . .Let that sink in. (Stair, n.d.-b, p. 1)

### **Case 12: Nikolas Cruz, age 19**

Nikolas Cruz committed a school shooting on February 14, 2018, in Parkland, Florida, where he shot and killed 17 people and injured 17 others. Cruz had a history of shooting animals with a pellet gun, vandalizing property, and getting into trouble in school to the point of expulsion. He posted on Instagram about guns, knives, and killing animals. Classmates described him as being a little “off.” Cruz’s adoptive parents both passed away, after which he and his half-brother went to live with friends who were unaware of his social and behavioral problems. Cruz was seemingly obsessed with his legally purchased guns (Wan, Sullivan, Weingard, & Berman, 2018). Prior to the shooting, there had been 36 calls to the police about him, an anonymous tip on the FBI tip line, and a direct FBI call reporting a comment he left on YouTube. Cruz left cell phone videos of his attack plan, notes in his cellphone about his thoughts, posts on Instagram, and comments on YouTube describing his intentions for violence.

Cruz presented with a number of warning signs about his psychological state. Prior to the incident at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Cruz displayed disturbing behavior, such as cutting himself live on the social media platform Snapchat (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016). He had made prior suicide attempts, including an attempt at killing himself two months prior to the shooting by taking an overdose of Ibuprofen. He also admitted to drinking too much alcohol two

years prior in another attempt to kill himself. He related being depressed about his mother passing away three months prior to the shooting (State of Florida, 2018).

Cruz received a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder when he was younger; in addition, he had difficulty in school and was physically and verbally abusive toward his mother when he was upset. An investigative report from Florida Department of Children and Families (2016) revealed a diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as well. He had an individualized education program in school, which allowed accommodations primarily for his social and emotional needs.

The following is a brief summary of the in-home investigation that occurred on September 28, 2016:

This investigation is being closed with no indicators to support the allegations of inadequate supervision or medical neglect. Regarding the allegation of inadequate supervision the v does have capacity and has a behavior disorder and was apparently exhibiting those behaviors, however the v does not require 24 hour supervision and the collaterals have indicated that they have no issues with the ap's care for the v. Regarding the allegation of medical neglect the v's clinician from Henderson mental health has stated that there are no issues with the v's medication and he has been compliant with taking his medications and keeps all of his appointments. (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016, p. 2)

Cruz's family life was unstable. He was adopted, and his father passed away from a heart attack when the boy was young. Following his mother's 2017 death from complications from pneumonia, he lived with his stepbrother and friends of the family.

He stated that his adopted family would occasionally put him down and make him feel bad, leading him to feel “crazy, worthless, and stupid” (State of Florida, 2018, p. 115).

Cruz had many interactions with the police. Of the 43 times police were called to the home prior to the shooting, 23 incidents involved Cruz and the rest involved his brother, Zachary. Reported incidents included fighting or running away, acting out toward his mother, and shooting his pellet gun, as well as two calls warning the sheriff’s department about Cruz (Broward County Sheriff’s Office, n.d.).

Cruz exhibited violent tendencies, leading to police responses. He also related his violent intentions on various forms of social media. On Instagram, he posted photos of dead animals; on YouTube, he made comments on videos of other mass murderers, such as Charles Whitman. In a comment in response to the Whitman video, Cruz stated he was going to commit a similar act.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission (2018b) found that several instances of troubling behavior among 30 people who had interacted with Cruz. These behaviors included seven counts of animal cruelty/killing, 19 counts of Cruz handling a weapon, eight statements of hatred toward a group/person, 11 statements referencing harming or killing a person, and three statements of Cruz saying he would shoot up a school (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2018b).

Cruz discriminated against Jewish people and African Americans, often drawing swastikas on desks and making offensive jokes about Nazis and Hitler. He had drawn Nazi symbols on his backpack and started cutting himself around the time he broke up with his girlfriend (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016). In a cellphone

video recorded shortly before the February 2018 incident, Cruz expressed his beliefs about society, calling people “stupid” and “brainwashed” by the government (State of Florida County of Broward, 2018, p. 3).

Cruz revealed some reasoning for his attack in his cellphone videos. He talked about his feelings for himself and others, and his desire for people to know who he is:

Today is the day. The day that it all begins. The day of my massacre shall begin. All the kids in school will run and fear and hide. From the wrath of my power they will know who I am. I am nothing. I am no one. My life is nothing and meaningless. Everything that I hold dear I let go beyond your half [*sic*]. Every day I see the world ending another day. I live a lone [*sic*] life, live in seclusion and solitude. I hate everyone and everything. (State of Florida County of Broward, 2018, p. 3)

Like several of the mass murderers discussed herein, Cruz expressed sadness and frustration at being unsuccessful with relationships. He mentioned a girl named Angie in one video, saying, “My love for you, Angie, will never go away. I hope to see you in the afterlife. From one day or another you will end and we’ll all die” (State of Florida County of Broward, 2018, p. 3).

Cruz planned his attack in advance and left evidence of the impending attack on social media. On September 24, 2017, an individual reported Cruz to the FBI and to YouTube for leaving a comment stating “Im [*sic*] going to be a professional school shooter” (Goldman & Mazzei, 2018). He left notes on his phone detailing how to shoot:

Control your breathing and trigger pull. Your [*sic*] the one who sights in the rifle for yourself.adjust the scope to your shooting ability. Keep that adjustment every time.you have to shoot to yourself only to one self.my trigger squeeze is my ones ability. samething [*sic*] every time. (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2018a)

On November 12, 2017, Cruz searched “shooting people massacre,” saving photos from other school shootings onto his phone. He obtained the schedule for Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. At some point between February 6 and February 8, 2018, Cruz searched “is killing people easy.” On February 9, he searched “therapist for homicidal.” On February 10 and February 11, Cruz looked at several Wikipedia pages of school shootings and searched the terms “virginia tech massacre,” “columbine diary,” “ar-15 close quarter combat,” and “school shooter footage” (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2018a).

Cruz had tried to warn friends the day of the shooting. He texted a friend “JT” and asked when school was over, what class he was in, and who his teacher was. He attempted to text his ex-girlfriend but she did not respond. The shooting resulted in 17 deaths and 17 injuries. Cruz fled the scene on foot, first going to Walmart and then to McDonald’s, where police apprehended him (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2019).

### **Common Themes in Social Media and Communication**

After analyzing the open-source data for psychosocial characteristics and evidence of fame-seeking, I analyzed communications of the offenders. This analysis



included examination of themes based on the proposed framework and assumptions, as well as a linguistic analysis to determine themes through frequency of use. I first recorded data in Excel, and then imported them into NVivo for qualitative analysis. A Word Query analysis returned a list of the most frequently used words and phrases. Data for this portion were communications that came solely from the perpetrators.

Upon examining the communications for themes, I was able to draw several conclusions. I based these statistics on all 12 offenders, unless otherwise noted. Offenders made comments referencing different types of motives, the most popular one being fame (83%; where fame was explicitly noted as a motivational factor). The next most frequent motive was power (33%). All perpetrators in the sample communicated about violence, with 75% posting about violence on social media. The most common platform for leakage was YouTube (42%). Four of 12 offenders made videos but never uploaded them to YouTube; eight kept a form of communication that was either typewritten or handwritten and not on social media, and three posted photos on Instagram.

Eleven of 12 offenders (92%) had described a fantasy of wanting to commit violence. Six (50%) offenders displayed narcissism and six (50%) displayed psychopathic tendencies, based on the subtypes of psychopathy provide by Millon and Davis (1996). Eight (67%) offenders had prior legal problems before their attack. With regard to mental illness, 11 offenders (92%) suffered from delusions, some form of paranoia, or a break with reality; eight (75%) had received or were receiving mental health treatment of some form; two (17%) had treatment recommendations they never

followed up on; and one individual never received recommendation or treatment for a mental health issue.

Sixty percent of the non-Columbine shooters made a specific reference to Columbine, and 33% chose a specific attack date related either to Columbine or an anniversary. In their communications, nine (75%) of the 12 offenders discussed having a role model or someone they wished to emulate, and seven (58%) made racist comments about specific groups. Lastly, all 12 offenders had some attachment to their target, having either attended school or worked at that location at some point.

### **Word Frequency in Communications**

I imported all manifestos, journals, social media postings, and other forms of personal communications by each offender into NVivo for analysis. A Word Query analysis allowed me to determine common words among perpetrators, adding to the common themes reported in the previous section. Once the Word Query for each offender was complete, I entered the list of words used in each analysis into Excel, generating a pivot table depending on the common words. The subsequent statistics gathered from the analysis refer to specific references to different concepts rather than allusions to topics.

In analyzing psychosocial characteristics, I found relationships were a common theme among the perpetrators: Ten (83%) mentioned specific failures at love/relationships, five (42%) noted females in some form (e.g., *girl*, *woman*, *girlfriend*), and 10 (83%) mentioned loneliness (e.g., *alone*, *lonely*). Several perpetrators wrote about family relationships, with five (42%) mentioning *mom* (*mother*) and one perpetrator having murdered his mother. Six (50%) of the 12 offenders wrote or spoke about their

fathers, two having murdered their fathers. Furthermore, five offenders (42%) mentioned abandonment or rejection, six (50%) used the word *depression* in their communications, and five (42%) specifically referenced suicide.

Examining words related to the attacks, seven (58%) of the offenders used the words *kill, killing, killer, or killed* in their communications; four (33%) used the word *wrath*, with the same number using the word *power*. Seven (58%) of the 12 study subjects used a word relating to death (e.g., *die, death, dead, deaths*), five (42%) used the word *shoot* (e.g., *shoots, shooter, shooting*), and six (50%) mentioned gun or gun-related words (e.g., *rifle, shotgun, bullets, handgun*).

From the 60% of non-Columbine offenders who referenced Columbine in their communications, 33% made a reference to Eric Harris and 33% made references to shotguns (the weapon used by Harris). Two of the Columbine copycats had in common the following words related to Columbine: *NBK, Nazis, shotgun, bombs, and Eric Harris*. Among all 12 offenders, 10 (83%) mentioned school (*high school, college, elementary school*) in their writing; of the two who did not mention schools, one had not committed his shooting at a school. Six cases (50%) referenced *cops* or *police*. Lastly, four (33%) used the word *fame* or some form of the word (*infamous, infamy, famous*) in their communications, the rest simply referencing fame.

After analyzing the data relating to psychosocial characteristics and social media focusing on psycholinguistic traits, I was able to identify common characteristics and behaviors. The six main themes that emerged after analysis of psychosocial characteristics and Word Query of communications included: fame as primary motivation

(based on offender quotes), preoccupation with violence, presence of specific role models/copycat behavior, a strong opinion about society/racial groups, symptoms of narcissism/mood disorder/personality disorder, and failed relationships (see Table 1). Other areas of interest related to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior included family discord, suicidal tendencies, and similarities between Columbine copycats.

Table 1

*Presence of Themes Relating to Psychosocial Characteristics and Fame Seeking*

Subject	Themes					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Dylan Klebold	x	x		x	x	x
Eric Harris		x		x	x	x
Alvaro Castillo	x	x	x	x	x	x
Seung-Hui Cho		x	x	x	x	
Jared Loughner	x	x	x	x	x	x
Adam Lanza	x	x		x	x	x
Geddy Kramer	x	x	x		x	x
Elliot Rodger	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chris Harper-Mercer	x	x	x		x	x
Jesse Osborne	x	x	x			
Randy Stair	x	x	x	x	x	x
Nikolas Cruz	x	x	x	x	x	x

*Note.* The six themes gathered from the study subjects are presented in the table as follows: (1) fame as primary motivation (quote); (2) preoccupation with violence; (3) presence of specific role models/copycat behavior; (4) strong opinion about society/racial groups; (5) symptoms of narcissism/mood disorder/personality disorder; and (6) failed relationships.

### **Summary and Transition**

This study involved an examination of the psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior of 12 American individuals who completed or attempted mass murder. I analyzed open-source data to determine psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior to identify common characteristics and behaviors among offenders. I gathered data and subsequently analyzed and coded each piece of data multiple times to ensure the highest possible levels of validity, reliability, and transferability relating to a qualitative study. Findings in this study were sufficient to answer both research questions relating to psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior among offenders known to have made statements desiring fame, thus confirming prior assumptions.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion through a focus on the purpose and nature of the study and a discussion of the reasoning behind this research. I summarize the research as it relates to current literature on mass murder and mass murderers and how these findings add to that knowledge base. I end with examining limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research studies, lastly providing a discussion of how this study may impact social change initiatives.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### Introduction

Mass murder receives significant attention in the mainstream media (Bondü & Beier, 2015; Cohen et al., 2014; Follman, 2015b; Hamlett, 2017; Huff-Corzine et al., 2014; Lowe & Galea, 2017; Towers, et al., 2015). Statistics show mass murder frequency has increased in the last several years; however, it is still a rare event (Auxemery, 2015; Hamlett, 2017). Prior researchers focused on risk factors and psychological traits of offenders have identified such risk factors as depression, suicidal tendencies, and mental and cognitive deficits (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Stone, 2015). Psychosocial findings included social frustration, repeated failures, and a desire for revenge (Fox & Fridel, 2016; Langman, 2017c; Stone, 2015).

Prior researchers on mass murder made recommendations about policy changes and gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). Others focused on the competitive nature of past mass murderers and a need to outdo predecessors (Langman, 2017c; Lankford, 2016b). Although some knowledge of mass murderers and their psychological characteristics exists, a question remained with regard to the motives and mentality of mass murderers before the event, and why they choose to seek fame in such a violent manner (Eskey et al., 2015; Rokach; 2017).

To address the gap relating to the motive and mindset of mass murderers and why they seek fame, I selected 12 individuals for this case study to provide a deeper analysis of psychosocial characteristics and social media activity. By analyzing data relating to psychosocial characteristics and analysis of social media focusing on psycholinguistic

traits, I was able to identify common characteristics and behavior. The six main themes identified from this research were fame as primary motivation, preoccupation with violence, presence of role models/copycat behavior, a strong opinion about society/racial groups, symptoms of narcissism/mood disorder/personality disorder, and failed relationships. Other areas of interest included family discord, suicidal tendencies, and similarities between Columbine copycats.

The research questions which corresponded with the findings and identified themes are as follows:

*Research Question 1:* What are the unexplored psychosocial characteristics of fame-seeking individuals in the United States who complete or attempt mass murder?

*Research Question 2:* What are ways that fame-seeking individuals who complete or attempt mass murder in the United States express their need for fame on social media platforms?

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Past researchers have explored several areas with regard to mass murder, including examination of psychological traits, social factors, and revenge as a motivation (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Fox & Fridel, 2016; Langman, 2017c; Stone, 2015). There have also been recommendations about policy changes and gun control (Fox & DeLateur, 2014a). Other scholars focused on the competitive nature of past mass murderers (Langman, 2017c) and general characteristics of fame-seeking rampage killers; however, literature lacked an intense focus on psychological characteristics and how those killers communicate when it comes to fame (Lankford, 2016a).

Because of the previous limited knowledge of mass murderers and their psychological characteristics, particularly addressing motives and mentality of mass murderers as well as fame-seeking traits (Eskey et al., 2015; Rokach, 2017), I used specific themes to drive this qualitative research study. Thematic analysis required examination of psychosocial characteristics and fame-seeking behavior grounded in incorporating theories of social learning, psychopathy, family dynamics, and copycat behavior. The result was identification of six common themes among fame-seeking offenders who had completed or attempted mass murder.

In addition to the six themes gleaned from this study, it is important to discuss other noteworthy findings. Family discord was present among perpetrators, with 42% mentioning mom/mother and one perpetrator going so far as to murder his mother. I also found that 50% of offenders spoke about their fathers; two murdered their fathers. In his manifesto, Elliot Rodger referred to his mother nearly 400 times; in addition, he mentioned his father 268 times and his brother, whom he wished to murder, 39 times (Rodger, n.d.), the latter lending support to Sulloway's (1996) research on siblicide and birth order. Nearly all offenders experienced and expressed paranoia or delusions at some point, partially addressing the gap proposed by Eskey et al. (2015) and Rokach (2017) with regard to the mindset of mass murderers.

Last, offenders who shared an admiration for Columbine (67% of subjects cited Columbine as inspiration) also showed similarities in behavior. Such behaviors included the use of phrases such as *NBK*, *Nazis*, *shotgun*, *bombs*, and *Eric Harris*, as well as modeling behavior and dress after Harris. These offenders cited their motivation as



wanting to memorialize Columbine, and to kill more people than those and other past offenders. They were also seeking fame or infamy to gain notoriety and recognition.

These themes aligned with assumptions suggested earlier, confirming that fame-seeking mass murders share similar characteristics related to leakage and copycat behavior (Langman, 2017b; O'Toole et al., 2014), efforts to outdo one another (Lankford, 2016b), and attempts to mirror each other's behavior, especially those deemed to be Columbine copycats (O'Toole et al., 2014). Last, these fame seekers expressed their motivations in behaviors and words, with many in this study (83%) wanting fame as a main outcome. These findings offered some insight into why mass murderers seek fame, something questioned by Lankford (2016b) and Rokach (2017).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations were present in this study, beginning with the inability to transfer results to a broader population (Creswell, 2014; Leung, 2015). The offenders I chose for this study met specific criteria. Another limitation related to my role as the sole and primary researcher (Creswell, 2014). As I was the only one to code, analyze, and present the data, the possibility for human error presented a threat to confirmability, credibility, and dependability (Creswell, 2014).

Consequently, conclusions and findings resulting from a qualitative study from a sample size of 12 individuals in the United States are not generalizable to all mass murderers, and thus the results are representative of only this specific sample. Purposeful sampling, which occurred based on availability of data, was also a limitation. Due to

legal restrictions in the dissemination of information on some mass murderers, not all information that is present on such individuals was available.

### **Recommendations**

Findings in this study could provide a foundation for future research in this subject area. Scholars could reproduce this study using a sample of offenders from a different country. As more mass murders have occurred in the United States since the start of this study, another similar study could entail evaluating more recent offenders and their characteristics. In addition, as new information emerges after Freedom of Information Act restrictions on cases expire, more data will become available for analysis.

Eight of 12 offenders committed suicide after their attack; however, I did not explore suicide in this study. Harris and Klebold killed themselves at Columbine High School, which may have set the stage for future school shooters. Increasing numbers of Columbine copycats, both unsuccessful and successful, suggests the need to conduct an analysis exploring the concept of fame-seeking copycats and suicide.

Last, a more thorough examination of the demographics of fame-seeking offenders could also provide a research opportunity. The average age of fame-seeking offenders in this study was 20 years, which aligned with Lankford's (2016b) findings of fame-seeking rampage shooters. Examining a potential relationship between age, leakage behavior, and social media usage may also generate meaningful results.

## Implications

After completing an exhaustive review of previous literature on mass murder, I was able to identify a gap: determining the motive and mindset of mass murderers before their attack, and examining the circumstances around fame-seeking behavior. This study had as a foundation theories relating to social learning theory (Bandura 1977), birth order and family dynamics (Sulloway, 1996), psychopathy (Millon & Davis, 1996), and the copycat effect (O'Toole et al., 2014). I used these theories to gather, analyze, and code data to assess commonalities and unique traits among 12 individuals who completed or attempted mass murder in the United States. Those study subjects were Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, Alvaro Castillo, Seung-Hui Cho, Jared Loughner, Adam Lanza, Geddy Lee Kramer, Elliot Rodger, Christopher Harper-Mercer, Jesse Osborne, Randy Stair, and Nikolas Cruz.

The findings led to the identification of six main themes and a few supplementary themes among fame-seeking individuals. The main themes were fame as primary motivation, preoccupation with violence, presence of specific role models/copycat behavior, strong opinions about society/racial groups, presence of narcissism/mood disorder/personality disorder, and failed relationships. The additional themes of family discord, suicidal tendencies, and similarities between Columbine copycats lend confirmability to findings by of previous researchers. The findings relating to family discord, suicidal tendencies, and role models confirmed research by Langman (2017a, 2017b, 2018a), and the age of fame-seekers in this study related to findings by Lankford (2016b).

The results of this study contribute awareness and further understanding of the psychosocial characteristics of mass murderers, particularly those seeking fame. Hopefully, additional research will emerge in the future, aiding in gathering even more awareness of this slowly growing U.S. phenomenon. Social change can come from many different facets, including mental health awareness; stigma reduction; strategies for law enforcement, schools, and other stakeholders to improve threat assessment; and social awareness about mass murder for the media.

In a study of active shooter incidents from 2000 to 2013, found 62% of shooters had mental health stressors, with 12 of 16 having a mood disorder (Silver, Simons, & Craun, 2018). The authors also found that 56% of shooters in their study showed leakage behavior, with the average age of the shooter being 40 to 49 years, and the next highest group ranging from 18 to 29 years. In my study, 75% of the sample had posted about committing violence or about violence in general, which aligns with studies by Langman (2012), who argued the school shooter typically engaged in more leakage behavior than other mass murderers, with mass murderers overall engaging in approximately 70% of leakage behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014; Cohen et al., 2014). Giffords Law Center (2018) found that 80% of people who are considering suicide give clues to their ideations.

Knowing all this, it is important to educate families, schools, and mental health facilities on credible warning signs from individuals who may be suicidal or seeking attention. Findings in this study also suggest copycat behavior and fame-seeking is found in younger, more vulnerable age groups. It is important to pay special attention to the

words individuals struggling with multiple stressors and psychological strain reveal in their communications. Also meriting consideration are conflicts with attachments (work, school, home, etc.), as all offenders in this sample had a prior attachment to their target. As younger people often make their intentions known ahead of time, learning how to listen and respond appropriately is vital. Part of this includes not putting a stigma on individuals who seek mental health care, encouraging others to educate themselves on warning behaviors, as well as recognizing signs of deteriorating mental health, which may initially be a cry for help.

The media can play a part in raising awareness, as well as helping to reducing stigma, the Werther effect, and instances of copycat behavior. Past studies have shown that, after a tragic event such as suicide or a mass shooting, copycat behavior can persist for up to two weeks (Towers et al., 2015). Some researchers have argued that not naming perpetrators after a mass casualty event can aid in reducing copycat and fame-seeking behavior (Lanford & Madfis, 2018). Given the findings in this study, I agree with the suggestion that mainstream media consider reducing the fame they give to mass murderers.

Findings from this study by no means imply that all individuals who portray these psychosocial characteristics or fame-seeking behaviors will plan or commit a mass attack. Instead, individuals display warning signs during the escalation of such an event, pointing to the need for reevaluation of current threat assessment and mental health assessment strategies. Such consideration could include taking into account the findings in this study, which add to current literature on mass murderers and fame-seeking behavior.

## Discussion

In view of these findings, careful consideration of how these results could impact society is needed. It is evident the media plays a role in influencing individuals, both negatively and positively. In this study, I highlighted some of the negative consequences that result from media influence. The copycat effect, and the more harmful effect of Columbine, is still present among America's youth, with the latter prevailing 20 years later. Change is not possible until the media, including social media, accept the social obligation to help alleviate this negative effect on society. Examining reasons why offenders chose to emulate others in the form of dress, communications, and ultimately violence and death is necessary. Even more important is an inquiry into what caused such individuals to admire dangerous role models, as well as to become so angry, lonely, depressed, and isolated. America needs to replace these dangerous role models with positive, less harmful ones, and to answer the question: Can censorship in the media really help an individual who is missing a positive role model?

Families go under scrutiny the moment a tragedy occurs. After Columbine, Americans and beyond asked why the Klebold and Harris parents had no idea their sons were planning a mass attack. Is it the burden of the family alone to raise a child responsibly, and can we ask that of parents who are overworked and/or raising children in single-parent households? Should a family be entirely accountable for the well-being, safety, and actions of an individual who is not in their care 24 hours a day, 7 days week? Nikolas Cruz's adopted mother called to have a psychological evaluation on her son, that was unfounded at the time. Should she bear all the burden? Similarly, should the burden

to make an accurate judgment call fall on a mental health evaluator who has one interaction with an individual deemed harmful? Can schools carry all the liability if a child gets in trouble multiple times on campus, even though the child does not attend school all day?

Responses toward negative occurrences such as criminal behavior are typically reactive rather than proactive. Instead of questioning why individuals did what they did, the question should be how they got to that point, or what keeps other individuals with similar circumstances from engaging in similar behavior. As researched, mass murderers experienced repeated failures, had lack of social interactions, became fascinated with an unhealthy role model, and lost track of reality. Individuals who have not or will not commit murder can likely identify with some or all of those characteristics. It is worth considering what resources these individuals were lacking, missing, or denied, perhaps making improvements to threat assessment, mental health, and family systems. What is clear is that such an undertaking is an effort that involves many factors, with no one group able to solve this problem alone.

### **Conclusion**

Previous researchers have studied mass murderers, with gaps regarding the motivation and mental capacity of mass murderers and, more recently, those wishing to achieve fame. Because approximately half of mass murderers commit suicide and the rest are incarcerated, with fame-seekers more likely to commit suicide (Lankford, 2016b), I decided to explore the direct communications of these offenders who had specifically voiced a desire to seek fame. Because an extensive examination of the psychosocial

characteristics and fame-seeking behavior of such offenders had not yet occurred, this research served to expand on literature currently available in this subject area.

This was the first study to incorporate these two areas relating to this population in a comprehensive, psychologically focused manner, thereby adding to research in the areas of fame-seeking and role models (Langman, 2017b, 2018a; Lankford, 2016b). Although this research added to current literature and confirmed results found by other scholars, additional research is merited to expand upon literature and aid in transferability and confirmability of this current study's findings. Future researchers could focus on new subjects from another geographical location or study another subset or typology. Further exploration of the themes presented in this study could heighten awareness of this topic, and similar findings related to mass murder and fame-seeking individuals could also occur.



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## Appendix A: Comprehensive List of Keyword Searches

<i>Active shooter events</i>	<i>Impact mass shooting</i>
<i>Adam Lanza</i>	<i>Impact mass shooting impact</i>
<i>Alvaro Castillo</i>	<i>Jared Loughner</i>
<i>Aurora theater shooting</i>	<i>Jesse Osborne</i>
<i>Christopher Harper-Mercer</i>	<i>Kip Kinkel</i>
<i>Columbine effect</i>	<i>Mass homicide manifesto</i>
<i>Columbine High School</i>	<i>Mass homicide blog</i>
<i>Columbine high school shooting</i>	<i>Mass homicide diary</i>
<i>Copycat mass murder</i>	<i>Mass homicide firearm use gun statistics</i>
<i>Dimitrios Pagourtzis</i>	<i>Mass homicide frequency</i>
<i>Dylan Klebold</i>	<i>Mass homicide gun use</i>
<i>Elliot Rodger</i>	<i>Mass homicide impact</i>
<i>Eric Harris</i>	<i>Mass homicide journal</i>
<i>Fame-seeking</i>	<i>Mass homicide letter</i>
<i>Family dynamics</i>	<i>Mass homicide manifesto</i>
<i>Fame-seeking mass murder</i>	<i>Mass homicide media coverage</i>
<i>Fame-seeking mass murderers</i>	<i>Mass homicide media impact</i>
<i>Fame-seeking mass murderers</i>	<i>Mass homicide motive</i>
<i>Fame-seeking rampage murders</i>	<i>Mass homicide risk</i>
<i>Firearm statistics</i>	<i>Mass homicide statistics</i>
<i>Geddy Lee Kramer</i>	<i>Mass homicide suicide note</i>

<i>Mass homicide video</i>	<i>Mass public shooter journal</i>
<i>Mass homicide website</i>	<i>Mass public shooter letter</i>
<i>Mass murder and the media,</i>	<i>Mass public shooter manifesto</i>
<i>Mass murder deaths by firearms</i>	<i>Mass public shooter suicide note</i>
<i>Mass murder firearm use</i>	<i>Mass public shooter video</i>
<i>Mass murder frequency</i>	<i>Mass public shooter website</i>
<i>Mass murder gun use</i>	<i>Mass public shooting</i>
<i>Mass murder impact</i>	<i>Mass public shooting firearm use</i>
<i>Mass murder media coverage</i>	<i>Mass public shooting frequency</i>
<i>Mass murder media impact</i>	<i>Mass public shooting gun use</i>
<i>Mass murder motive</i>	<i>Mass public shooting impact</i>
<i>Mass murder myths</i>	<i>Mass public shooting media coverage</i>
<i>Mass murder risk</i>	<i>Mass public shooting media impact</i>
<i>Mass murder statistics</i>	<i>Mass public shooting motive</i>
<i>Mass murderer journal</i>	<i>Mass public shooting risk</i>
<i>Mass murderer letter</i>	<i>Mass public shooting statistics</i>
<i>Mass murderer manifesto</i>	<i>Mass shooter diary</i>
<i>Mass murderer suicide note</i>	<i>Mass shooter journal</i>
<i>Mass murderer video mass murderer blog</i>	<i>Mass shooter letter</i>
<i>Mass murderer website school shooter</i>	<i>Mass shooter manifesto</i>
<i>manifesto</i>	<i>Mass shooter suicide note</i>
<i>Mass public shooter blog</i>	<i>Mass shooter video mass shooter blog</i>
<i>Mass public shooter diary</i>	<i>Mass shooter website</i>

*Mass shooting*

*Mass shooting*

*Mass shooting firearm use*

*Mass shooting frequency*

*Mass shooting gun use*

*Mass shooting media coverage*

*Mass shooting motive*

*Mass shooting risk*

*Mass shooting statistics*

*Media impact*

*Newtown*

*Nikolas Cruz*

*No notoriety campaigns*

*Psychosocial characteristics of mass murderers*

*Rampage mass shooter video*

*Rampage shooter blog*

*Rampage shooter diary*

*Rampage shooter journal*

*Rampage shooter letter*

*Rampage shooter manifesto*

*Rampage shooter suicide note*

*Rampage shooter website*

*Rampage shooting*

*Rampage shooting firearm use*

*Rampage shooting frequency*

*Rampage shooting gun use*

*Rampage shooting impact*

*Rampage shooting media coverage*

*Rampage shooting media impact*

*Rampage shooting motive*

*Rampage shooting risk*

*Rampage shooting statistics*

*Randy Stair*

*Risk factors of mass murderers*

*Sandy Hook*

*School shooter diary*

*School shooter journal*

*School shooter letter*

*School shooter suicide note*

*School shooter video school shooter blog*

*School shooter website*

*School shooting*

*School shooting*

*School shooting firearm use*

*School shooting frequency*



*School shooting gun use*

*School shooting media*

*School shooting media coverage*

*School shooting motiv*

*School shooting risk*

*School shooting statistics*

*Seung Hui Cho*

*Spree shooter blog*

*Spree shooter diary*

*Spree shooter journal*

*Spree shooter letter*

*Spree shooter manifesto*

*Spree shooter suicide note*

*Spree shooter video*

*Spree shooter website*

*Spree shooting*

*Tarasoff*

*U.S. firearm statistics*

*U.S. gun statistics*

*U.S. mass homicide*

*U.S. mass homicide frequency*

*U.S. mass homicide statistics*

*U.S. mass murder*

*U.S. mass murder frequency*

*U.S. mass murder statistics*

*U.S. mass public shooting frequency*

*U.S. mass public shooting statistics*

*U.S. mass public shootings*

*U.S. mass shooting frequency*

*U.S. mass shooting statistics*

*U.S. mass shootings*

*U.S. rampage shooting frequency*

*U.S. rampage shooting statistics*

*U.S. rampage shootings*

*U.S. school shooting frequency*

*U.S. school shooting statistics*

*U.S. school shootings*