Mass murderers and
their early childhood environments

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1. Introduction

In 1986 Dietz grouped mass murderers into three categories. The head of the family who murders his entire family out of jealousy, revenge, or loyalty is family annihilator. Pseudo-commando is the type who takes it out on society to draw attention to himself or teach them a lesson. Set-and-run killer bombs buildings or vehicles, sets fires, or tampers with food or products, and escapes before the murder actually takes place. In place of this last category, Holmes and Holmes (1998) added disgruntled employee, who gets back at his former workplace to right his personal injustice.

To explain how the mind of school shooter develops, Levin and Madfis (2009) hypothesized five stages. First, the subject experiences long-term negative experiences at home, school, work, or in his neighborhood early in life or in adolescence (chronic strain). This leads to the lack of bonds with family and society, and he is less restricted to conventional behavior (uncontrolled strain). Then a particularly devastating short-term event occurs which triggers the execution of his murderous act (acute strain). After this, the subject actually starts planning his action. Finally, he acts out his school massacre. Levin and Madfis called this whole developmental process cumulative strain, in which they posit each stage builds on one another. Though their model is designed for school massacre specifically, they implicate a possibility of extending this process to mass murders in general, comparing each stage with that of adult mass murders.

Mullen (2004) termed autogenic massacre for those who “indiscriminately kill people in pursuit of a highly personal agenda arising from their own specific social situation and psychopathology” (p. 311). According to him, their common characteristics are: “(i) male, (ii) under 40 years of age, (iii) a social isolate, (iv) unemployed or marginal work, (v) bullied and/or isolated as a child, (vi) fascinated with weapons, and (vii) a collector of guns” (p. 319). Knoll (2010) generally seemed to agree with Mullen on (iii) and (v) that “[pseudocommandos] were bullied or isolated as children, turning into loners who felt despair over being socially
excluded” (p. 89). Ferguson, Coulson, and Barnett (2011) also mentioned the popular image of a school shooter as being “a socially inept loner experiencing constant bullying” (p. 10). Although each study targets a different specific group of mass murderers, they all seem to assume that social isolation and bullied experiences are the key to the development of the mass murder personality they target.

For the subjects to face such a common fate of being isolated and bullied especially after entering school, there is a high possibility that they went through similar family backgrounds prior to that. As we see, the above-mentioned researchers mainly talk about childhood isolation/neglect only, seemingly not including parental abuse as a part of their backgrounds. In fact Kimmel and Mahler (2003) clearly stated that “almost all the adolescent shooters came from intact and relatively stable families, with no history of child abuse” (p. 1442). Levin and Madfis (2009) take a position against this, and state that “many school shooters had experienced chronic strain for years at home and were quite hostile toward their parents and other members of their family” (p. 1230) and that “almost half of school shooter sample [in their study] came from homes wrought with conflict” (p. 1231). Harper and Voigt (2007) and Fox and Levin (2003) also seemed to agree that parental abuse is a part of family backgrounds of homicide-suicide subjects. Here we clearly see some inconsistencies on the childhood environments of mass murderers prior to entering school.

Although they are often put together as parts of dysfunctional family conditions, neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse each has a different psychological effect on child’s development. While physical abuse produces aggression toward others, psychological attacks and criticism by the parents appear to be specifically associated with low self-evaluation (Briere & Runtz, 1990, pp. 360-361). Neglect, on the other hand, is associated with more severe cognitive and academic deficits, social withdrawal and limited peer acceptance, and internalizing problems than physical abuse (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002, p. 690). We need to clarify exactly what happen in their childhood especially before entering school to understand what causes the mass murderous mind.

2. Methodology

In this study, early childhood environments of 30 mass murderers were examined to clarify their nature, special attention paid to whether they included abusive factors or not. The 30 cases included: Timothy McVeigh (Aitken, 2001), Charles Whitman (Lavergne, 1997), Julian Knight (Haddow, 1998), Jacob Roberts (La Corte, 2012), Marc Lepine (Gagne & Lepine, 2008), Martin Bryant (Wainwright & Totaro, 2009), Adam Lanza (Lysiak & Shapiro, 2013), Jim Jones (Reiterman, 1982), Howard Unruh (Albright, Rose, & Kniss, 2011), James Holmes (Castillo, 2012), Seung-Hui Cho (Ferenc, 2007), Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Cullen, 2009), Anders Breivik (Orange, 2012), Eric Borel (Karacs, 1995), David Koresh (Haldeman, 2007), Joseph Wesbecker (Ames, 2005), Andrew Kehoe (Bernstein, 2009), James Huberty (Kavanaugh, 2009), Jared Loughner (Berger, 2011), One Goh (Ames, 2012), George Hennard (Hayes, 1991), Ronald Simmons (Marshall & Williams, 1991), James Ruppert (Wayne, 1995), Michael Ryan (Josephs, 1993), Baruch Goldstein (Greenberg, 1999), Richard Speck (Altman & Zoporyn, 1967) George Banks (Sisak, 2011), Thomas Hamilton (Cullen, 1996), and Nidal Hasan (Dao, 2009).

These 30 cases were grouped, based on the most salient characteristic that dominated the early childhood environment of each mass mur-
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Levin and Madfis (2009) emphasize that family problems are not directly visible by traditional measures. Thus, we also referred to information on Murderpedia, Crime Library on truTV, Wikipedia, radford.edu, and Youtube, whenever necessary, to better understand the limited literary information in order to pass our final judgment.

3. Results

Isolation and Bullied Experiences

Not all the 30 subjects were bullied or even isolated. Those who seem to have been isolated at school were 10. They were: Marc Lepine, Martin Bryant, Adam Lanza, Howard Unruh, Seung-Hui Cho, David Koresh, James Ruppert, Michael Ryan, George Banks, and George Hennard. Those who seem to have been bullied to a certain extent at school were nine: Timothy McVeigh, Martin Bryant, Adam Lanza, James Ruppert, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, David Koresh, Michael Ryan, and George Banks. Though the number was substantial, against what was originally expected, isolation and bullied experiences at school seem to not cover the backgrounds of all the subjects, representing only one-third of them. Instead, eight distinct groups emerged.

Type 1: Cannot Express True Feelings

Some subjects were placed in an insecure condition, in which they felt they might be abandoned, or lose their living basis once they offended their guardian. These subjects felt that they were secondary in guardian’s priority. Thus, they could not express their true self, especially their negative feelings at home. This inability to express their true feelings also extended outside home. They always played a perfectly nice person who never offended others’ feelings. Julian Knights was a class clown, making jokes and entertaining everybody. However, inside their mind they were very lonely and timid, always worried about being hated. To overcome this extreme uneasiness, they highly depended on guns, knives, racist philosophy, fundamental religion, and militarism, with which they were compensated for their insecurity, feeling that they could wash away everything at any time if they wanted. Timothy McVeigh, Charles Whitman, Julian Knight, Jacob Roberts, and Marc Lepine belonged to this type.

Type 2: Intentionally Left Out of the Family

Some of the subjects were intentionally left out of the whole family. They were hated, avoided, and rejected because they failed to meet parents’ ideal or expectation, or parents simply did not like them. Step mother or father often hated the child from the spouse’s old marriage. These subjects were often compared with parents’ favorite (step-)siblings. As a family scapegoat, they were always blamed or excluded even when other members were having a good time together. Though they acted defensively and elegantly, deep inside they were sad, disappointed, and depressed. Due to their early lack of meaningful human interactions at home, they were also childish in their interaction with peers. Their stubborn manner made them further rejected and alienated by their peers and teachers, leading them to be an outcast, loner, and the odd in school and society. In their isolated life, they were also obsessed with compulsive about their own rules and cleanliness, frequently washing hands and changing clothing. One Goh, George Hennard, James Ruppert, Eric Borel, and Andrew Kohoe belonged to this type.

Type 3: Highly Rigid Parents

Some parents believed that sticking with their own principle, no matter what happened, was the highest virtue. They put their belief...
before their child’s well being. Though physically present, these parents neglected child’s emotional needs self-righteously for their belief. However, exposed to their parents’ earnest lifestyle every day since very young age, the subjects unconsciously got soaked in it, and came to believe that their parents’ way of living as something sublime that they should also follow as they grew older. Strangely enough, for this reason, they did not hold grudge against such parents at all. They rather respected such parents for not even regarding their own happiness. Ironically, parents’ inflexible belief came to fill in their child’s emotional void, which had been created by their belief in the first place. Consequently, extremely rigid parents ended up creating another individual whose rigidity was way beyond social norm. With time, they started to think that correcting social wrongs, which contradicted their parents’ teaching, at the expense of their own lives would be their mission, as if to die martyrdom. Though this group very often seems to be highly under influence of religious teachings, the very cause of their murderous act was the emotional neglect caused by their parents’ absence or neglect, to which they had a casual access in their childhood.

**Type 4: Left Alone Indifferently**

In this type, the subjects were left alone, deserted, or abandoned by the life design of their families. This happened even in intact families, but more often after parents’ divorce or parent’s leave or decease. Some were left with grandparents or at orphanage. Others were left home unattended or in the care of the neighbor while young mother worked outside for a long time, often in the name of making ends meet. Indifference to the subjects was consistent, and stable without such fluctuation, not accompanied by sinister intention as is seen in “Cannot Express True Feelings” or “Intentionally Left Out of the Family.” Because of their structurally stable neglect condition, the subjects in this group, seemed more mentally stable in spite of their negative mentality. Their highly rigid inflexible personality caused them frictions with other people, which made them prickly and paranoid, and also collect and ruminate every negative incident that they experienced. Joseph Wesbecker, James Huberty, Thomas Hamilton, Ronald Simmons, David Koresh, and Jim Jones were all in this type. In the cases of David Koresh and Jim Jones, religion filled in their emotional void caused by their parents’ absence or neglect, to which they had a casual access in their childhood.

**Type 5: Peculiar Mother**

In some cases, mothers neither showed affection to their baby nor provided physical touches after birth. Martin Bryant, Adam Lanza, Howard Unruh, and Anders Breivik belonged to this type. Bryant and Lanza later developed Asperger’s syndrome. Unruh developed paranoid schizophrenia. Breivik showed peculiar smiles in infancy, indicating a symptom of attachment disorder. The total lack of skin ships during early infancy seems to have deteriorated their natural mental disorder. Bryant and Lanza were totally isolated in their classes because of their childish approaches to make friends. Bryant was known to creep up and leap on other kids. Lanza was severely bullied.

As opposed to other cases, in Michael Ryan’s case, his mother doted on him out of her own insecurity, providing whatever he wanted and affirming whatever acts he did. This made Ryan a self-centered child, often sullen, stubborn, and moody, which led him to be bullied without mercy by peers. He later became quiet and shy, never taking part in peers’ activities. He also came to lie often and, if people did not
believe him, threw tantrums. His last murderous act was as if to be one big tantrum in itself against the whole society.

**Type 6: Empty Parents**

In some families, there were no normal daily communications between parents, either because the couple’s relation was already cold or because their personalities preferred being alone and not talking to other people. Not getting their expected responses back, the children stopped talking to their parents very early, though inside they were desperate for warm human interactions. In such environments, they could not develop normal human affects such as empathy. However, to the outside world, these families often maintained a normal, or even ideal, appearance. These subjects grew quiet and aloof, not even noticing people’s greetings. But once they felt invaded, they overreacted and behaved arrogantly and defensively. Later, when they hit the puberty, their new energized personas started having frictions more frequently with outside world. Those who belonged to this group were James Holmes, Seung-Hui Cho, Eric Harris, and Dylan Klebold. This type sometimes overlapped with “Peculiar Mother” type, because mother’s peculiar personality often led to the absence of communication between parents. For this reason, only those cases that were judged to be more due to parents’ relationship problems rather than one person’s aberrant character were categorized into this group.

**Type 7: Highly Intoxicated Secondary Psychopath**

Some developed mentalities ready to fight anytime for their survival in their highly hostile childhood environment. Rather than resorting to one blasting act, they repeated aggressive reactions to protect themselves whenever they felt offended. However, when they got highly intoxicated, this aggressive reaction could get out of hand and created a situation that looked exactly like a mass murder. For this reason, they lacked the resolution to revenge once and for all, which is typically seen with most mass murderers. This could indicate that their murderous act was just an extention of their daily aggressive reactions. Secondary psychopaths are known as being highly emotionally reactive. Thus, they usually report more fights, greater alcohol abuse, lower socialization, and higher trait anxiety (Skeem, Johansson, Andershed, Kerr, & Louden, 2007; Kimonis, Frick, Cauffman, Goldweber, & Skeem, 2012). These characteristics perfectly match the above-mentioned illustrations of the subjects in this group. Richard Speck and George Banks belonged to this type.

**Type 8: Schizophrenia Caused by Drug**

Jared Loughner belonged to this type. His family was very private, even ignoring neighbor’s casual greetings. Thus, there is a possibility that his family was the Empty Parents type. Also from his overly kind and nice gesture until his early high school years, he has a touch of the Cannot Express True Feelings type. On Loughner, who had already been in such a fragile condition, the break-up with his high-school girl-friend had a devastating effect. He started to take drugs which had a highly hallucinatory effect. As a result, he developed schizophrenia, which consequently pushed him across the line of murderous rampage.

4. **Discussion**

Drug and alcohol in Types 7 and 8 were mere extra factors that escalated the subjects’ mass murderous inclinations. Thus, it was considered appropriate that we leave these two out when we investigate the nature of the mass murderers’ early childhood environments.
Then, what was common among the rest of the other six types? Whether due to parent(s)’ interest, intention, belief, personality, relationship, or family structure, attention was either not available or not directed toward children. In the case of mother spoiling Ryan, seemingly there was more than enough attention at a glance. However, by providing whatever Ryan wanted indiscriminately, she actually provided him nothing that he truly needed to establish his own independence. It was as if mother was a part of Ryan and never existed as a separate entity. McElroy (1978) pointed out that both too close and too distant mother–infant relationship can cause a serious disruption. Ryan’s case was considered as the former. As a result, Ryan could not enter his peer groups after he entered elementary school. Ironically, spoiling her son ended up in exactly the same effect as not caring for him at all. Thus, when we consider the commonality among the six, we can say it was lack of true attention toward the subjects. That is to say, what was happening in the mass murderers’ early childhood was emotional neglect. As Kimmel and Mahler (2003) asserted, abuse was not confirmed as being substantial in any of the six types. Even when it was suspected, it was at least secondary and additional in effect to the tone already set by their overwhelming neglect. Abuse was happening either sporadically, in a short time period or after their basic personalities were already formed by their neglect.

Ney, Fung, and Wickett (1994) posited that the most severe psychological conflicts arise from neglect. They stated, “[h]aving been deprived of the necessary ingredients to their normal development, children never seem to accept the loss of the childhood that could have been. They keep searching as adolescents and adults…” (p. 711). This mental state perfectly coincides with the strong envy and dependency of the mass murder subjects in this study. Emotional neglect totally deprived the subjects of socializing ability against their strong inner desire to be accepted and join. They were totally isolated against their will. In some cases the subjects made friend(s), girl friend(s), spouse(s) or family/families. However, even in such cases, it was highly likely that they kept their true feelings inside and just maintained superficial relationships, or that they felt even more insecure because of the additional responsibility for their family members.

Even if they were exposed to something positive later in their lives, the subjects’ minds were already undermined irreparably by their long inner loneliness and sadness. They were placed under emotional neglect beyond normal level for a substantial period of time, without interruption, during their early childhood, which happened in eight different ways. It seems that from the very early childhood they were already set in their destructive path. What decides “whether vengefulness will be a passing concern or a lifelong quest” (Lafarge, 2006, p. 128) seems to depend on whether the child is placed early enough under a high level of consistent emotional neglect for a substantial period of time, which cripples his later social ability. For this reason it is hypothesized that in case normal family interactions had been available even briefly before their negative social mode solidifies, probably before five, it would have substantially reduced the possibility of their development of the mass murderous mind. Therefore, in this study, the most powerful environmental factor on the development of the mass murder personality was considered to be the substantial level of emotional neglect which sets in during their early childhood as a part of the chronic strain. This determines the subject’s future path. It seems that not all the four strains proposed by Levin and Madfis (2009) had the same level of impact. To test this new possibili-
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ty, further studies are recommended.

[References]
Donald’s changed how police operate.” CNN.


