

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MASS KILLERS – IS THERE ANY METHOD IN THE MADNESS?

FOLLOWING THE CUMBRIAN TRAGEDY WHERE DERRICK BIRD SHOT DEAD 12 LOCAL PEOPLE IN AN APPARENTLY MOTIVELESS AND SENSELESS KILLING SPREE – PSYCHIATRIST DR RAJ PERSAUD REVIEWS THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON WHY THESE RARE BUT DREADFUL CRIMES OCCUR

All murder is difficult to understand, but rampage killing, where many people are murdered within a short space of time, stands amongst the most inexplicable.

Even serial killing, where more than one homicide occurs over an extended period of time, unlike the rampage variety, where the crimes are committed in a very compressed time frame, has appeared somehow more with the grasp of modern psychology. This is because research into serial killers, once they have been apprehended, has allowed striking patterns to emerge.

Serial killers are frequently, though not always, living out some sadistic sexual fantasy whereby murder satisfies grave perversions. They have often experienced very disturbed childhoods, whereby normal relationships or appreciation for them, just fails to develop and linked to these difficulties are bizarre sexual needs.

Having got away with the first murder, serial killers are on a learning curve, where, for example they may intelligently and psychopathically develop an appreciation for how to target the kind of victim living on the margins of society, like prostitutes or other marginalised minorities, who are unlikely to attract adequate police time or be missed by many others. The psychology of serial killers is indeed now so well worked out, that 'personality profiling' is even used in the modern day police strategy to arrest them.

Serial killers try to avoid capture, but mass killers appear oblivious to this problem. Serial killers have a clear though warped reason for their murders, mass killers appear the closest we come to in crime for true motivelessness. Serial killers appear in a sense to be using murder as a way of re-exerting control over chaotic lives – could this be the one psychological junction where mass and serial killing come closest to each other?

The explosion of rage which characterizes spree or rampage killings, remains particularly perplexing – how can anyone feel so abruptly angry that they suddenly and so completely lose all touch with reality to the extent of killing such a large group of total strangers?

A very real difficulty for Forensic specialists attempting to research the subject, is that most of this kind of killer ends up unavailable for proper study. Either because the authorities had to shoot them, as the only way to end the killing the spree, or the perpetrators end up taking their own lives as an essential part of whatever process was in train.

Indeed, suicide following a series of homicides, is such a common feature of rampage killings that they are even referred to within the field of Forensic Science as an 'extended suicide'. In other words, the suicidal nature of the act has to be seen as intrinsic to any understanding of the rest of this tragedy.

However, sometimes the killer, though they commit suicide or are killed by the police, has left some kind of testimony, a sort of suicide note, which helps psychologists piece together what was going through their mind.

For example, in 1993 Dion Terres, a 33-year-old, white male, shot two people apparently at random in a McDonald's in Wisconsin, injured others and then shot himself.

What was unusual about this spree killing was that he left in the car, used to drive to the restaurant, a 40-minute videotape of himself explaining his actions the day before the shooting, where he lists his frustrations and upsets which appear to have occurred through out his life. Significantly in terms of theories around these bizarre killings, it appeared that he had been semi-planning some kind of action like this for years previously. It looks like at least a sub-group of these perpetrators have been coping with injustices they perceive as being metered out to them by an unfair and indifferent world, by using vivid fantasy where they finally 'set the world to rights' through spree murder.

One should be cautious however about over-interpreting and over-generalising to other killers, theories suggested by material from someone such as Terres, who clearly expresses the desire in his tape to become notorious for his final terrible act of murder.

'Narcissistic injury' is the term used to describe killers like Terres by psychologists, because they are particularly emotionally wounded by their failures in life. These humiliations stand in stark contrast to how well they believe they should be doing, given their conviction they are in fact superior to others. Or at the very least they should be doing better than they are. How to explain this predicament? Well, maybe there is a conspiracy to keep me from getting what is rightfully mine....

So although these events appear outwardly to 'come out of the blue' in fact they were often part of the mental arena of the brooding perpetrator for some time previously. The fantasy is finally turned into reality because of the well known narrowing of the imagination which arises from personality difficulties or clinical depression. Put brutally simply, other coping options fail for them.

There are basically two main kinds of rampage killings – one where a family is wiped out – usually by a disgruntled or depressed father. The other main type could be referred to as 'non-familial'. The two main motivations in these familial killings are firstly, a man realizes he is losing his family through some mechanism such as divorce or seperation, and therefore decides that life isn't worth living without them, and if, for example, he can't have his children, then no one can. It is an ultimate act of possessiveness.

The second chief cause of family slayings is that a depressed man feels that some awful future awaits his family because of his failure, as in loss of a job, and feels that in killing everyone and then himself, he is sparing his family from endless suffering in the future. It's a kind of mercy killing in the warped mind of someone whose reasoning has gone way out of kilter with depression, or some other psychological dysfunction.

If families are not the victims, then fellow employees are the next most likely group to experience a rampage killing. The classic example of this would be disgruntled, alienated work colleagues who avenge themselves, as in the 1986 shooting dead of 14 postal employees in Oklahoma by 44 year old fellow worker Pat Sherrill, who was apparently about to be sacked.

Another discontented former post office employee, refused reinstatement to his job, 31 year old Thomas Macilvane, shot dead four supervisors in 1991 in Detroit, Both of these postal workers shot themselves more or less immediately after the killings and their macabre acts contributed to the emergence of a slang term in the US; 'going postal', to describe being driven crazy by work.

Experts argue that this kind of killer is in a sense essentially trying to kill the organization or group, which the individual victims represent.

The 'Beserk' or 'Amok' syndrome (terms sometimes used to describe rampage killings) are now understood within the field of Forensic science as a form of 'protest' against an 'injustice'. Rampage killers are basically kind of saying its 'payback' time.

For example, 25 year old Mark Lepine killed 14 women and injured 15 people at a college in Montreal in 1989, left a suicide note claiming this dreadful deed was a protest against feminism.

Unlike most other homicides, then, the casualties are not chosen so much because of their personal relationship with the perpetrator, but more because of who, or what they represent.

Such massacres appear outwardly random, but in fact victims are being selected: they are chosen because they are members of a category – racial, economic, or communal. It is this race, organisation or community who the killer feels is responsible for his misery. The murder spree fixes the problem of getting even, by killing anyone who fits group membership, on which he lays the blame for his own failures in life, and therefore are the target of his hate.

In non-familial mass killings we see a repeated pattern of failures in life, particularly in the arena of work, and in personal life through failed friendships and intimate relationships. This is combined with diminishing ability to cope with the resulting stress. Add to this potent and ominous mix, now, a chronic tendency to blame others for disappointments. What will ignite the touch paper are acute triggers which provoke the actual decision to kill and die. Frequent precipitants found in the past in rampage killings have been sudden unemployment or relationship breakdown, such as the ending of a marriage.

So a deep sense of frustration, failure, and disappointment in someone who sees themselves as the victim, combined with blaming others for their own problems, mixed in with mounting pessimism that their difficulties cannot be solved, leads to suicidal and homicidal feelings entwined.

In a study of rampage killers in the USA, David Lester, a Professor of Psychology at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, USA, found that while a total of 98 incidents took place from 1949 to 1999, 90% occurred in the period 1980–1999. This data analysis suggests a dramatic increase in this kind of homicide in recent times. This urgently suggests that Governments may need to pay heed to policies that could have an effect.

Psychologists would not agree with David Cameron's initial assessment following the Cumbrian killings, that, to paraphrase, its impossible to legislate against some switch being thrown in a person's brain.

Academics would argue that patterns indeed emerge even in these most inexplicable of events, which suggest clues as to how to prevent them.

For example, another intriguing finding of Lester and colleagues study, entitled '*Mass Homicide and Suicide - Deadliness and Outcome*' is that rampage killings are much more likely to occur on week days compared to other kinds of homicide which are more often perpetrated at week-ends. This statistical anomaly, oddly enough, might provide some clues as to the key contrasts in motivation between most kinds of homicide and the 'mass' or 'rampage' killer.

Most homicides occur within relationships where the victim and perpetrator know each other. It arises out of strong emotion that arises from these relationships and their history.

However the most common finding in rampage killings is that revenge is being committed by a resentful executor who is targeting people apparently at random, but in fact it's really because of the group they belong to, and therefore represent. At its broadest sense, victims are chosen because they represent society at large and revenge is being taken on society because of hurts and injustices which have occurred.

When the location is an office, as it frequently is, revenge is frequently being taken therefore on co-workers, and given a precipitant might be an event at work, this could explain the odd finding that mass killings tend to occur on week days.

But the problem remains, many, if not millions are unhappy with their work place and with society, why take revenge in this bizarre manner?

Christopher Cantor and Paul Mullen of the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Monash University, Melbourne along with other colleagues, published a study in the journal *Archives of Suicide Research* where they argued that the media may also play an inadvertent role in these tragic events.

They investigated a series of seven mass-homicides occurring in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom between 1987 to 1996, and argued a kind of modeling process occurred whereby perpetrators were being influenced by previous mass killing incidents. In particular the reporting via the media was thought by Cantor and Mullen to be influential and could have lead to so called ripple effects extending over a period as long as ten years. For example an original so called 'Hoddle St.' incident occurred in Melbourne, Australia in August 1987, and was followed only 10 days later by the notorious Hungerford episode in the U.K., where similarity in characteristics of the two events were found to be striking. Four months after Hoddle Street, another incident occurred in Queen St., Melbourne - the city of the original incident.

While we can't stop the media reporting these incidents, Paul Mullen, a famous Forensic Psychiatrist based in Australia, argues in another paper he published in the journal *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* that one clue as to the correct policy approach to preventing this dreadful occurrences comes from the history of Malaysia where the term Amok first arose.

In colonial times, in that particular region of the world, was a well known syndrome of young men running 'amok' and killing others in a spree. The British colonial masters of the area actively pursued a policy of avoiding killing these perpetrators in apprehending or sentencing them. Instead they were consigned to asylums for the insane. This was such an ultimate and public humiliation, for that culture, at that time, that this denied these young men status and death, so depriving the mass killer, argues Mullen, of their *raison d'etre*.

Mullen's argument is that if perpetrators of massacres are predominantly awkward, obsessive individuals overwhelmed by resentment at their own powerlessness, actively attempting to portray them as they are, is a much more helpful prevention strategy. Compared at least to the inadvertent global media attention, which reinforces an idea, that in death, they achieve the power, which always eluded them in life.

Mullen suggests that potential mass killers, and we know from research they are probably many more out there actively fantasizing about this kind of act than convert to performing it, are attracted to the demonic image which becomes part of the media story.

Mullen contends; who would want to join the club of obsessive 'wimps' - who can only feel powerful or gain meaning in life by killing the innocent and unarmed – if this is how the media changed it's reporting?