

Nine Types of Childhood Environment That Actually Produced Mass Murderers Based on the Information in Lay Literature and on the Internet

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Abstract: Mass murderers have received relatively little academic interest compared with serial murderers. Although a solid basis set for understanding mass murderers already exists, there seem to be certain inconsistencies in the understanding of the environmental backgrounds of mass murderers, especially from the viewpoint of the presence or absence of abuse, bullying, and isolation. This study examines the environmental backgrounds of 28 mass murderers to see if there are some patterns that appear repeatedly. In particular, this study focuses on clarifying whether these patterns are neglect-oriented, abuse-oriented, or both and whether various factors are of equal importance in creating mass murderers. This preliminary research intentionally used lay literatures on true crimes and Internet-based information that are normally overlooked in academic research.

Keywords: etiology of mass murder, childhood backgrounds, family environment, environmental factors, neglect, pattern

1. Introduction

Mass murderers have received relatively little scholarly interest compared with serial murderers [1]. Fox and Levin suggest that this could be because mass murderers are either found dead at the crime scene or ready to surrender after their mission, their crimes lack sexual/sadistic characteristics, and they do not cause the same degree of anxiety or media sensation as serial killers due to their short acting period [2]. Nonetheless, they are of great interest to behavioral scientists and mental health professionals [3], and there is already a solid basis set for understanding mass murderers.

Mass murder is defined as the slaughter of four or more victims by one or a few assailants within a single event, lasting for a few minutes to several hours [4]. Mass murderers have a clear-cut motive most of the time, which is often revenge for what the victims have done or represent [5], [6]. According to Bowers et al. [3], some of their traits are antisocial personality, narcissism, oversensitivity, rigidity, obsession, self-righteousness, grandiosity, and impulsivity. For mass murderers, every day is a constant battle with surrounding influences and their own negative thoughts. Mullen coined the term *autogenic massacre* to describe the actions of those who “indiscriminately kill people in pursuit of a highly personal agenda arising from

their own specific social situation and psychopathology” [7, p. 311]. In 1986, Dietz grouped mass murderers into three categories [8]. The head of the family who murders his entire family out of jealousy, revenge, or loyalty is a *family annihilator*. A *pseudocommando* is the type who takes anger out on society to draw attention to himself or to teach society a lesson. A *set-and-run killer* bombs buildings or vehicles, sets fires, or tampers with foods or products, escaping before the murder actually takes place [8]. In place of the set-and-run killer categorized by Dietz, Holmes and Holmes added the *disgruntled employee*, someone who takes revenge on his former work-place to right a perceived injustice [9].

2. Research questions

However, despite these basic understandings, there seem to be certain inconsistencies in the understanding of the environmental backgrounds of mass murderers, which seem to need clarification. Levin and Madfis argue 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 [10]. They claim that almost half of the school shooter sample in their study came from homes wrought with conflict. Harper and Voigt and Fox and Levin also seem to agree that parental abuse is a part of the family backgrounds of homicide-suicide subjects [11], [5]. On the contrary, Kimmel and Mahler claim that almost all the adolescent shooters came from intact and relatively stable families, with no history of child abuse [12]. Others point out that social isolation and bullying experiences are key factors in the development of the mass murder personality. Knoll asserts that pseudocommandos were bullied or isolated as children, turning into loners who felt despair over being socially excluded [13], [14]. Ferguson, Coulson, and Barnett also describe the popular image of a school shooter as a socially inept loner experiencing constant bullying [15]. Mullen seems to support this position, characterizing offenders as: “(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” [7, p.

319]. Based on their view that mass murderers are from abusive family backgrounds, Levin and Madfis further hypothesized five stages by which school shooters develop [10]. 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 subject’s lack of bonds with family and society, and he is less restricted by conventional standards of behavior (*uncontrolled strain*). A particularly devastating short-term event then occurs, which triggers the desire to carry out a murderous act (*acute strain*). After this, the subject actually starts planning his actions. Finally, he acts out his school massacre. Levin and Madfis called this whole developmental process *cumulative strain*, in which each stage builds on the previous stages. Although their model was originally designed to describe school massacres, Levin and Madfis indicate the possibility of extending this process to mass murders in general, comparing each stage with the corresponding stage in the development of adult mass murders. They characterize school massacres “as one particular subset of the mass murder phenomenon” [10, p. 1229].

Thus, regarding what happens at the chronic strain stage, there are stances which assert abuse, no abuse, and bullying and isolation. However, these inconsistencies are significant; neglect, physical abuse, and psychological abuse each have a different psychological effect on a child’s development. Although physical abuse produces aggression toward others, psychological attacks and criticism by parents appear to be specifically associated with low self-evaluation [16, pp. 360–361]. Neglect, on the other hand, is associated with more severe cognitive and academic deficits, social withdrawal and limited peer acceptance, and internalization of problems than physical abuse [17, p. 690]. Thus, it seems necessary to look into the details of mass murderers’ environmental backgrounds to clarify what exactly caused their chronic strain, including whether the chronic, acute, and uncontrolled strains are indeed of equal importance in generating mass murders, which Levin and Madfis seem to imply.

3. Data source

Unlike serial murders, there are official data sources available for mass murders. However, they are mainly used to assess prevalence and patterns, such as offender age, race, sex, weapon use, and the nature of the victim/offender relationship [2]. These do not necessarily cover offenders' upbringings. Thus, it is highly difficult to obtain official records of the detailed personal backgrounds of a wide range of mass murderers. Family problems are also not directly perceptible by traditional measures [10].

In general, lay literatures and the internet have been considered unreliable and thus inappropriate sources of information for academic research, and as such, these sources have never been turned to. The authors of these sources often tend to emphasize shocking details to attract a larger number of readers. In addition, their sources are often suspicious, and their factuality is not fully confirmed. However, despite the lower credibility of these source, the information they offer is also obtained through some level of research conducted by the authors and could include some accurate information. Thus, if a wide range of such information is gathered and compared to discover commonalities, there is a possibility that untruthful information could be discovered and eliminated, leaving only limited true information. Considering the current official tendency to largely ignore mass murderers' backgrounds, such research could serve as pilot research, which could inspire further research on this subject. Furthermore, in this age of information, information from lay literatures and the web cannot simply be ignored. Thus, in this research, we made the very first attempt to utilize lay literatures and on-line information as the sources to look into mass murderers' backgrounds. At the least, this research could reveal the patterns of what authors who have a strong interest in this field consider important to the cause of mass murders, which influence the formation of public views on this subject. Because mass murder develops unintentionally, often due to environmental factors beyond control, and because a strong body of research on which

this research could build is absent, it was also considered more desirable to—as much as possible—avoid any special conditions in the selecting process of subjects.

4. Methodology

In this study, the environmental backgrounds of 28 mass murderers were examined to see if there are some patterns that appear repeatedly. We particularly focused on clarifying the types of chronic strains, specifically whether they are neglect-oriented or abuse-oriented or both, and whether the chronic, acute, and uncontrolled strains are of equal importance in generating mass murders. The information used in this preliminary research was mainly derived from lay literatures on true crimes and internet sites such as Murderpedia, Crime Library on truTV, Wikipedia, radford.edu, YouTube, and so forth, which contain a great deal of information from sources directly connected to the subjects. The subject was included as long as ample information was available from either of the two types of sources to help clarify the above questions. As a result, most of the cases included turned out to be those that were once most extensively reported on by the media. Because this research was qualitative, we avoided examining too many cases, for this might hinder a careful examination of each case. At the same time, too few cases would not produce the credible common patterns we discussed. Considering the limited availability of information on mass murderers compared to that available for serial killers [1], we initially set the number of the cases that we would examine at around 30. (All the lay literatures referred to are listed after the references.)

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Because this research was preliminary in nature, specific assumptions were not set in advance, as in deductive qualitative analysis [18]-[20]. We first extracted from the sources all the information pertaining to mass murderer subjects' childhood backgrounds. First, the outstanding features that characterize the backgrounds of half of the cases were underlined. They were condensed by

deleting all unnecessary words and paraphrased into a short form. These short forms were transcribed on a coded sheet, and common categories were generated. These categories were then checked with the remaining half of the cases and revised, when necessary, to assure inter-coder consistency.

5. Results

The results are shown in the tables below:

Table 1 *Nine Types of Environmental Backgrounds That Produced Mass Murderers*

<u>Type</u>	<u>Subjects under Category</u>
Type 1 ^a Left alone unattended due to parental unconcern/financial reason/self-interest	Thomas Hamilton, Ronald Simmons, Joseph Wesbecker, James Huberty
Type 2 ^a Intentionally left out of the family/scapegoated	One Goh, James Ruppert, Eric Borel, Andrew Kohoe
Type 3 ^b Postnatal neglect/no skin contact due to peculiar personality/mental disorder of mother	Martin Bryant, Anders Breivik, Howard Unruh, Adam Lanza, Dylan Klebold
Type 4 No normal communications between parents due to their cold relationship/personalities	James Holmes, Seung-Hui Cho
Type 5 ^c Highly rigid parent(s)	Baruch Goldstein, Nidal Hasan
Type 6 ^d Overprotective mother	Michael Ryan
Type 7 ^e Cannot express true feelings due to insecure/demanding family condition	Timothy McVeigh, Charles Whitman, Julian Knight, Jacob Roberts, Mark Lepine, George Hennard, Eric Harris
Type 8 ^f Highly intoxicated secondary psychopath	Richard Speck, George Banks
Type 9 Drug-induced schizophrenia	Jared Loughner

Finally, the one category that best represents the environmental background of each case was decided by comparing it with similar cases. Although each case actually involves multiple factors, the subject was placed under this one category.

Note. ^aThe difference between type 1 and type 2 is whether there is malicious intention by parent(s)/parental figure(s). ^bIn type 3, the subjects were deprived of basic care after birth. This type was separated from other types of neglect that occur after the neonatal stage due to its even greater damage [21], [22]. ^cType 5 killers often take on religious/philosophical outlooks. However, it is the parent's inflexible personality that contributes to the violent urges, and not the religious or philosophical viewpoint itself. ^dThe overprotective mother is highly intrusive and does not allow the child to behave independently. As a result, the child becomes depressed. In the worst case scenario, the child could even develop schizophrenia [23]. ^eIn the family that "cannot express true feelings," the subject acts as an ideal child, being afraid of his parents' divorce or losing his own niche at home. ^f"Secondary psychopath" refers to those who cannot stop their habitual offenses despite the guilty feelings they experience each time [24].

Table 2 *Experience of Isolation and Bullying at School*

<u>The subjects suspected of having been isolated at school (9)</u>	Marc Lepine, Martin Bryant, Adam Lanza, Howard Unruh, Seung-Hui Cho, James Ruppert, Michael Ryan, George Banks, George Hennard
<u>The subjects suspected of having been bullied at school (8)^a</u>	Timothy McVeigh, Martin Bryant, Adam Lanza, James Ruppert, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Michael Ryan, George Banks

Table 3 *Major Incident(s) in Mass Murderers' Childhoods and their Age at that Time*

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Incident</u>	<u>Age</u>
Timothy McVeigh	Parents divorced	10 years
Julian Knight	Adopted	10 days
	Parents divorced	12 years
James Huberty	Contracted polio	3 years
	Mother abandoned family	8 years
Ronald Simmons	Father died	3 years
	Mother remarried	4 years
Marc Lupine	Parents separated (lived with other families, seeing mother only on weekends)	7 years
Eric Borel	Sent to mother's parents after divorce	Until 5 years
Joseph Wesbecker	Father died (passed from place to place, including orphanage for almost a year)	13 months
Andrew Kehoe	Mother died (a family of 13 children/fought with stepmother)	5 years
Jacob Roberts	Mother died (later lived with aunt)	2 years

Adam Lanza	Parents divorced (diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome/judge ordered a parenting education program)	16 years
Seung-Hui Cho	Immigrated to U.S.	8 years
Anders Breivik	Parents divorced	1 year
	Two reports filed concerning his mental health to instruct removal from his parents	4 years
Richard Speck	Father died	6 years

6. Discussion

There were nine types found from the environmental backgrounds of 28 mass murderers. Almost one third of these 28 subjects were isolated or bullied at school, including those who felt they were bullied. In regard to the type of maltreatment, neglect is clearly prevalent, at least from type 1 to type 4.

Some of the confusing cases are discussed below. Some researchers point out that Adam Lanza's mother doted on him. This could be true. However, from the fact that she was shot four times in the head before his rampage at school, it seems that Lanza harbored some anger toward his mother. An unidentified witness reported that Lanza, who had Asperger's syndrome, thought that his mother loved her students at Sandy Hook elementary (where she volunteered) more than him. The witness also stated that Lanza hated his mother because he was jealous of her students (Mail Online). Considering this, it is more likely that, at least in Lanza's own mind, his mother neglected him. It is also pointed out that Nancy Lanza was rigid, indicating her strict and emotionally distant disposition (Yahoo News) and that Lanza did not allow anyone to enter his room; he and his mother communicated only via e-mail. Nancy allegedly stayed at a New Hampshire hotel for two days before the shooting as part of an experiment in letting her son stay home alone to be independent (Mail Online). Considering Nancy's trial to leave Adam alone before the incident, it is quite likely that this type of rigid attitude toward him

started very early. Abe and Kato suggest that environmental factors might facilitate symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, such as dissociation, anxiety, depression, persecutory delusions, and antisocial behavior [25]. Thus, Lanza was placed under postnatal neglect/no skin ship.

The true backgrounds of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold of the Columbine High School Massacre seem unclear. Some researchers point out that they were the bullies rather than the bullied. Indeed, there are cases suggesting that those once bullied later turn into bullies [26]. However, when considering the etiology of their criminal acts, their initial "bullied" aspect better shows their original personalities. Eric, who was considered the principal offender of the two, called himself a "God of Sadness," and once said, "I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things." Dylan likewise wrote down in his journal, "I have always been hated by everyone and everything"[27]. Princeton sociologist Katherine Newman points out that they were not loners; they were just not accepted by the kids who counted. The parents of his then close friend Brook Brown stated, "[Dylan's parents] weren't touchy, feely parents... It was more clinical, but they cared about their kid" (YouTube). It is also pointed out that, although Dylan enjoyed getting dirty, Sue Klebold was an intellectual and a stickler for cleanliness, and the Klebold house was always orderly [28]. Because of his mother's academic orientation, Dylan was placed in a special elite course during his elementary school years. Dylan later developed a quick temper.

Eric's father was in the army, and he moved around frequently. Eric was a solitary boy who could not put down his roots anywhere. A minister later testified that although the Harris family was a great family—friendly, outgoing, and caring—Eric's father did not tolerate misbehavior in his home, and punishment was swift and harsh, which happened all in his family undiscernible from outside [28]. A little league team mate commented that Eric was the shyest of the group. His coach added that he was not afraid of the ball, but he just did not want to fail. Principal Frank DeAngelis described Harris as a deceptively polite teen, saying "Eric was the type of kid who, when he was in front of adults, would tell you what you wanted to hear" [27]. Around age 12, Eric walked around burning things [28]. There was also an episode in which Eric's father turned a deaf ear when the mother of Eric's friend Brook informed him that Eric intentionally broke the front shield of her son's car. Eric's father allegedly disregarded her claim, saying that it was just a trifling thing between kids. Eric himself later confessed that he was forced to be railed to be an angel [29], hinting that he was forced to pretend to be an obedient child under the unspoken family pressure. Considering all these pieces of information, Eric was placed under "cannot express true feelings," and Dylan under "postnatal neglect/no skin ship" under the suspicion that his mother's cold attitude started right after Dylan's birth.

There are some researchers who claim that Seung-Hui Cho spoke with his family weekly, and that they were an integral part of his life. However, according to a child psychiatrist who counseled Cho's family, he did not talk much about his life, even with his sister, who was supposedly one of the very few people that Cho felt comfortable with (YouTube). His dormitory roommate testified—based on interactions he observed, such as when Cho's mother dropped Cho off at campus—that there was unusual coldness between Cho and his parents, and there were no normal family interactions. Cho's psychiatrist also disclosed that his father described himself as being an introvert. Both of Cho's parents worked long hours—sometimes seven days a week—and were

rarely at home. Cho was diagnosed with selective-mutism; thus, he was placed under "no normal communication."

After losing his father—with whom he was very close—to a heart attack at the age of six, Richard Speck was psychologically abused by his stepfather. George Banks was constantly bullied because of his mixed-racial status as the son of a white woman and a black man. Both of them seem to have developed normal affects: Speck also had caring sisters, while Banks had a close relationship with his mother and some friends. However, because of their adverse environments, they developed secondary psychopathy; they got into fights and repeated petty crimes. At the time of each crime, Speck was high on both alcohol and drugs, and Banks on a mixture of prescription drugs and straight gin, which he took the night before. In both cases, the ingestion of the substances was believed to play a major role in triggering the mass murder. Thus, Speck and Banks were labeled specifically as highly intoxicated secondary psychopath, although they share characteristics with other categories.

Jared Loughner's family was described by his neighbor as being very private. Loughner also kept to himself, not even responding to others. His girlfriend when he was 15 also points out that he had a difficult relationship with his parents; his father "picked on him" [30]. Loughner's girlfriend also stated that his parents never let her come into his house, and she claimed that he had definite dysfunction in his family; his parents rarely acted as parental figures. Eventually, she left him because of his anger management problem. His close friend at high school testifies that there was a change in his personality after he broke up with his girlfriend. Loughner began to abuse alcohol and other drugs, specifically LSD and *Salvia divinorum* (a natural hallucinogen illegal in some states), and his life began to unravel. Thus, although he shares traits of "intentionally left out of family," taking into account that his drastic personality change happened after his drug abuse, Loughner was labeled specifically as drug-induced schizophrenia.

After carefully examining the types—except for the last two, which include abuse of alcohol and drugs—one can conclude that “highly rigid parent(s),” “overprotective mother,” and “cannot express true feelings” also seem to belong to neglectful environment type as with type 1 through type 4. Rigid parents do not respond to—and thus neglect—their child’s needs. Both maternal overprotection and psychological control are known to lead to depression because they do not allow the subject to develop psychological independence [31], [23]; lack of independent development is also caused by neglect. It is reported that out of all other forms of abuse and childhood trauma, neglect produces the unhappiest and dependent children, who suffer from the lowest degree of self-confidence/ego control and are the most preoccupied with negative relational dynamics [17]. It is possible that the negative influences of neglectful environments caused mass murderers to have difficulty with relationships, which lead to their later isolation and bullying experiences [32].

Regarding whether the chronic, acute, and uncontrolled strains are of equal importance, the fact that the environmental backgrounds of mass murderers seem to have certain clear patterns suggests that chronic strain plays the major role in generating mass murders. Uncontrolled strain can follow once certain mentalities are established by chronic strain, with acute strain being only a trigger. The age at which such negligent conditions began for the subjects should also be discussed. As Table 3 shows, some incidents, such as parental divorce, happened at relatively older ages (e.g., 8, 10, and 12). However, the negative impacts of troubled marriages on children start taking place well before actual divorce [33]. Negligent conditions due to parental preoccupation with spousal quarrels are more likely to have started at very early ages. A child is known to develop a cognitive framework called an *internal working model* around the age of three [34], [35]. A person’s later interactions with others are guided by memories and

expectations from this internal working model [36]. If the child’s basic needs for comfort, affection, and nurturing are not met and loving, caring, stable attachments with others are not established, the child develops a rare but serious condition called *reactive attachment disorder*, in which an infant/young child doesn’t establish healthy attachments with parents and caregivers [37]. Furthermore, it is known that five sixths of the human brain grows postnatally, and this growth lasts well into the second postnatal year [38]. If necessary early bonding experiences do not occur during this time period due to parental neglect, prewired synaptic connections are pruned, which could even lead to permanent deficits [39]. Taking all these factors into consideration, it is hypothesized that neglected children at the least develop a distorted internal working model. In the worst case scenario, they develop reactive attachment disorder or a neurologically impaired brain, which all result in their preoccupation with negative relation dynamics, psychological isolation, and even avoidant attitudes toward others [17], [39]. It could be this mental state that later leads to their violent urges, which are represented by pathological envy, revenge fantasies, and unexplained anger [13], [14], [40],[41]. Their chronic strains accumulate and are later ignited by acute strains, resulting in acts of mass murder [10].

As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, this research is utterly preliminary, with its information based on lay literatures and web sites. Nevertheless, the fact that several clear environmental types surfaced out of the 28 subjects’ childhood backgrounds suggests that there is a good possibility of producing similar, more reliable patterns by utilizing more credible official records of mass murderers’ backgrounds. As Lee et al. states, “genetic aberration per se is not the sole reason leading to violence; environmental factors such as childhood adversities play a significant part in the development of violent behavior” [42, p.445]. Further research is highly recommended.

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List of Lay Literature

All the lay literature referred to is listed here only in a brief manner to avoid unnecessary extension of References section.

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| Timothy McVeigh (Aitken, 2001) | Seung-Hui Cho (Ferenc, 2007) |
| Charles Whiteman (Lavergne, 1997) | Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (Cullen, 2009) |
| Julian Knight (Haddow, 1998) | <u>Anders Breivik</u> (Orange, 2012) |
| Jacob Roberts (La Corte, 2012) | Eric Borel (Karacs, 1995) |
| Marc Lepine (Gagne & Lepine, 2008) | David Koresh (Haldeman, 2007) |
| Martin Bryant (Wainwright & Totaro, 2009) | Joseph Wesbecker (Ames, 2005) |
| Adam Lanza (Lysiak & Shapiro, 2013) | Andrew Kehoe (Bernstein, 2009) |
| Jim Jones (Reiterman, 1982) | James Huberty (Kavanagh, 2009) |
| Howard Unruh (Albright, Rose, & Kniss, 2011) | Jared Loughner (Berger, 2011) |
| James Holmes (Castillo, 2012) | 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)

Nidal Hasan (Dao, 2009)

Author Profile



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