

Social psychology
theory aggression
criminology essay



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Mass shootings are a unique feature of American life which has occurred consistently throughout history in every region of the country. The increased lethality of such incidents is made possible by the use of large capacity ammunition magazines (defined as more than 10-rounds) which enable a shooter to rapidly fire off as many as 100-rounds without having to reload the firearm. Designed for military use to kill greater numbers of people more effectively, large capacity ammunition magazines have facilitated some of the worst mass murders ever committed in the United States (Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, 2013).

This essay will focus on the social psychology theory of aggression. Specific reference will be made to physical appearance of the shooter, psychological influences, social influences, external influences of the incident, gun usage, the setting, the profile of the victims and whether mass shootings are unique to American life or if other countries such as South Africa could be at risk for these type of incidents.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORY: AGGRESSION

Aggression is when a person intends to do harm to others. (Baron & Branscombe, 2012)

Social psychologists view aggression as stemming mainly from an external drive within people to harm others. This theory is indicated by different theories of aggression. These theories suggest that external conditions, such as frustration, seem to motivate people to cause others harms. This aggressive drive tends to lead to physical acts of aggression. The most well-known of these theories is the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which

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suggests that frustration leads to the arousal of a drive whose objective is to harm a person or an object. In addition the theory suggests that frustration is possibly the strongest and maybe single cause of aggression (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

Hostile aggression has traditionally been conceived as being impulsive, spontaneous, anger driven, motivated by the harming of a target, and occurring as a reaction to some perceived provocation. It is sometimes called affective, impulsive, or reactive aggression. Instrumental aggression is regarded as a calculated method of achieving some goal other than harming the victim, and being proactive rather than reactive. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory states that human were not born with large range of aggressive behaviour, rather they acquire them through direct experience or by observing others behaviour. As such, depending on a person's past experiences and their culture, people learn "(1) various ways of seeking to harm others, (2) which people or groups are appropriate targets for aggression, (3) what actions by others justify retaliation or vengeance on their part, and (4) what situations or contexts are ones in which aggression is permitted or even approved" (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). General aggression model (GAM) is a framework that has been built on the social learning theory. This theory posits that a sequence of events that may lead to overt aggression can be initiated by two types of input variables: (1) factors that are related to the current situation (situational factors) and

factors that are related to the people involved (person factors). Frustration, provocation of some sort, witnessing others people's aggressive behaviour and any other experiences that may cause discomfort, fall under the first category. Traits that predispose individual towards aggression, particular attitudes and beliefs about violence, the inclination perceive others' behaviour as hostile and certain skills related to aggression, make up the second category. The GAM states that these situational and personal factors lead to overt aggressive behaviour through their impact on the following three processes: arousal – physiological arousal or excitement, affective states – provoke hostile feelings and their outward manifestation, and cognition – bring up hostile thoughts. Thus, an individual's appraisal of a situation may either lead to restraining the anger or overt aggressive action. (Baron & Branscombe, 2012)

Script Theory

According to the script theory, scripts are sets of well-rehearsed, highly associated concepts in memory, often involving causal links, goals, and action plans. When items are so strongly linked that they form a script, they become a single concept in semantic memory. Moreover, even a few script rehearsals can change a person's expectations and intentions involving important social behaviours. A frequently rehearsed script gains accessibility strength in two ways. Numerous rehearsals create additional links to other concepts in memory, as such they increase the number of paths by which it can be activated. Numerous rehearsals also intensify the strength of the links themselves. This theory is particularly useful in accounting for the generalization of social learning processes and the automatic (and <https://assignbuster.com/social-psychology-theory-aggression-criminology-essay/>)

simplified) complex of perception-judgment-decision-behavioural processes. This includes an example of one simple aggression script involving retaliation. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Social Interaction Theory

Tedeschi & Felson's social interaction theory interprets aggressive behaviour (also known as coercive action) as social influence behaviour, namely an actor uses aggressive behaviour to produce some change in the target's behaviour. A person can use coercive actions to acquire something of value (e. g., information, money, goods, sex, services, safety), to get revenge for perceived wrongs, or to bring about desired social and self-identities (e. g., toughness, competence). According to this theory, the person whose choices are directed by the expected rewards, costs, and probabilities of obtaining different outcomes is the decision-maker. Social interaction theory offers an explanation that aggressive behaviours are motivated by higher level goals. Even hostile aggression might have some rational goal behind it, for instance punishing the person provoking them in order to reduce the likelihood of future provocations. This theory provides an excellent way to understand recent findings that aggression is often the result of threats to high self-esteem, especially to unjustified high self-esteem (i. e., narcissism). (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Person Factors

“ Person factors include all the characteristics a person brings to the situation, such as personality traits, attitudes, and genetic predispositions”

(Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Stable person factors are consistent over <https://assignbuster.com/social-psychology-theory-aggression-criminology-essay/>

time, across situations, or both. The main outcome of the person's consistent use of schemas, scripts, and other knowledge structures is this consistency. In this sense, personality is the totality of a person's knowledge structures. Further contributing to trait-like consistency, knowledge structures also influence what situations a person will seek out and what situations will be avoided. Together, person factors consist of an individual's readiness to aggress. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Environmental Factors

Family, community and cultural environment: Children draw inferences about the acceptability of aggression and aggressive behaviour from beliefs expressed by parents and peers. Although parents and peers are the closest influences on the socialisation of the youth, the community and culture also influence children through the child's connection to school, church, and the media. As such cultural variations of the acceptance of aggressive behaviour are relatively large. (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003)

Media violence: Observation of violence in mass media does not only arouse aggressive behaviour on a short term basis by priming aggressive scripts, and schemas, but it also arouses aggressive behaviour on a long term basis by altering scripts, schemas, and beliefs about aggression. (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003)

Maladaptive families/parenting: Parents use of poor discipline methods and inadequate monitoring of the children's activities are among the key problems linked to the development of life-long aggression. Caretakers with indifferent attitudes towards the child, permissiveness of aggression by the

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child, and physical punishment and other power-assertive disciplinary techniques are some of the factors identified by Olweus (1995) that create bullies. Children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to become abusive and neglectful parents and violent criminals. (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003)

Extreme social environments: Factors such as poverty, living in a violent neighbourhood, deviant peers, lack of safe recreational areas, and lack of social support tend to promote the development of aggressive personalities. (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003)

Situational Factors

Aggressive cues: Items that prime aggression-related ideas in memory are called aggressive cues. For example, Berkowitz & LePage (1967) found that just the presence of guns alone increased the aggressive behaviour of enraged research participants. More recently, this study has enhanced our understanding of the weapons effect by discovering that weapon pictures and words automatically prime aggressive thoughts. There are other situational variables that increase aggression, for instance exposure to violent television, movies, or video games, also appear to do so via cognitive cueing effects. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Provocation: The single most important cause of human aggression is interpersonal provocation. Provocations include insults, slights, and other forms of verbal aggression, physical aggression, and interference with one's attempts to reach an important goal. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

Frustration: Frustration can be defined as the obstruction of attaining a goal. Most provocations can be seen as a type of frustration in which a person has been identified as the cause for the failure to achieve the goal. Even frustrations that are fully warranted have been shown to increase aggression against the cause of the frustration and against a person who was not responsible for the failure to achieve the goal. “ More recent work has shown that displaced aggression, wherein the target of aggression is not the person who caused the initial frustration, is a robust phenomenon” (Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Incentives: The advertisement industry rests on the goal of making people want more things. By increasing the value of an object, one changes the implicit or explicit observed cost/benefit ratios, thus increasing intentional, instrumental aggression. Brief appearances of an incentive, for example money left on a table, can also influence aggression in a less deliberate way. (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)

PHYSICAL PROFILE OF PERPETRATORS

Most perpetrators of mass gun shootings at schools seem to fit a similar physical profile. According to Rocque (2012), they tend to be white, males and of middle to lower class economic standing. Bjelopera et al. (2013) seem to agree that perpetrators of mass gun shootings are white males. They state that perpetrators ranged in age from 11 to 66, with the average age of perpetrators being 33. 5 years.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

The majority of perpetrators have experienced some major loss before the incident. Even though most did not receive any services, the majority had a history of suicide attempts in their past or a documented history of significant depression. As such, the perpetrator can be depicted as a mentally disturbed person who has not received sufficient services and is depressed and/or suicidal. Depressive symptoms combined with a history of antisocial personality traits are predictive of violence. Most perpetrators place the blame for their personal problems on other people. Otherwise, they would take their own lives, but not the lives of others. Because they consider life to be miserable, they seek to commit suicide. But before doing so, they set out to kill those individuals they regard as the source of their misery (Fox, Burgess, Levin & Wong, 2006). " Thus, data from all sources available, imperfect though certainly they are, converge upon certain psychological characteristics: long-term antisocial traits, current depression, recent loss, and (more speculatively) perception that others are to blame for problems or are persecuting them" (Ferguson, Coulson & Barnett, 2011).

In many cases the perpetrators had engaged in other behaviours that caused alarm in friends, parents, teachers, or mental health professionals. These include fantasizing about violence, especially towards innocent people. (Ferguson, Coulson & Barnett, 2011)

The impact of frustration or goal-blockage on aggressive behaviour has been well-documented in the literature. Individuals who live frustrating lives tend to be more hostile, angry and aggressive than those who are able to achieve their central goals (Fox, Burgess, Levin & Wong, 2006). Further research on school shooters has shown several similarities in personality, such as " poor <https://assignbuster.com/social-psychology-theory-aggression-criminology-essay/>

control of anger, lack of empathy, and a combined sense of persecution, righteous indignation, and superiority” (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Nearly every mass shooting incident in the past twenty years, and multiple other instances of suicide and isolated shootings all share one thing in common, and it's not the weapons used. The majority of evidence points to the single largest common factor in all of these incidents are the fact that all of the perpetrators were either actively taking powerful psychotropic drugs or had been at some point just before they committed their crimes. Many studies going back more than a decade, as well as documents from pharmaceutical companies that suppressed the information show that SSRI drugs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) have well known, but unreported side effects, including but not limited to suicide and other violent behaviour. The most common psychotropic drugs that perpetrators are likely to take include Prozac, Zoloft and Ritalin. (Roberts, 2013)

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Rejection by peers may weakly predict violent behaviour, including school shootings. Studies show that peer rejection has a developmental associate with anxiety, depression, aggression and antisocial behaviour. Furthermore the termination of romantic relationships-a form of peer rejection-is linked to depression and loneliness. Several case studies indicate that failed peer relationships and humiliation tend to led to many shooting events. (Wike & Fraser, 2009)

Student perpetrators tend to have lower social status with peers, and they are more likely to have been harassed by peers. That is they have been

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teased, taunted, or bullied. "The Safe School Initiative found that 71% of attackers had experienced bullying and harassment" (Wike & Fraser, 2009). Because peer harassment is a common occurrence in schools peer harassment is probably best thought of as risk factor that elevates isolation and anger.

Most mass killers are socially isolated, consistent with the "loner" stereotype. They either live by themselves or, if living with friends or family, they do not typically share their problems and frustration. For some reason, they are withdrawn or isolated and feel they have no place to turn when they get into trouble. (Fox, Burgess, Levin & Wong, 2006)

It has been estimated that in 95% of mass murders, there is a precipitating event such as a divorce or job termination that occurred prior to the mass killing. (Duwe, 2005)

Researchers are attempting to explain school rampage shootings in terms of the social-psychological notion of imitation. There is evidence of this "copycat" factor, in which young people try to imitate high profile school shootings. In a sense, this notion of imitation and the influence of the media are related to social learning, which has been applied to criminal behaviour. Social learning is also concerned with the effect of peers on behaviour. (Rocque, 2012)

The social construction masculine identity is a cultural factor that researchers have pointed to as an explanation of school shootings. School mass shooters tend to demonstrate their hegemonic masculinity through violent actions. It is often the case that these perpetrators have been denied
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traditional male status and have perhaps had their sexuality questioned. It is interesting to note that most of the school rampage shootings have taken place in “red” or conservative states with a specific emphasis on masculinity and gun culture. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) argue, “homophobia – being constantly threatened and bullied as if you are gay as well as the homophobic desire to make sure that others know that you are a ‘real man’ – plays a pivotal and understudied role in these school shootings”. (Rocque, 2012)

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The majority of offenders showed an intense interest in violent media, including violent movies, music, video games, or books (Kidd & Meyers, 2002). Fox et al. (2006) seems to think that it is not uncommon for rumours and unscientific theories to surface in the wake of an act that seems so inexplicable—speculations about the influence of violence in movies, games or musical lyrics, the role of alcohol and prescription or recreational drugs, or psychiatric/behavioural disorders resulting from chemicals or even neurological abnormalities.

GUN USAGE

One of the factors that characterize the perpetrators of school shootings is fascination with guns, bombs, and other explosives. For example, the perpetrators of the violence at Columbine High School appear to have been deeply involved with violent video games and guns. “The duo hoarded bombs, explosives, and guns in their homes for a year while they planned

their attack. Writings found after the attack contained references to death, violence, superiority, and hate” (Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Researchers suggest that many children have easy access to firearms. They stated that most offenders used firearms owned by a family member to commit their crime. These researchers suggested that the availability of guns may contribute to feelings of toughness and may give that assailant a high status. It is apparent that many of the offenders were, in fact, seeking status among their peers. (Kidd & Meyers, 2002)

According to research studies a semiautomatic firearm is the weapon of choice for someone who looking to commit a mass murder. Most mass killers have been training in gun usage and have access to guns-they might go hunting, be military veterans, engage in target shooting, or work in a field of security. (Fox, Burgess, Levin & Wong, 2006)

SETTING

From the Bjelopera et al. (2013) report, public mass shootings happen in relatively public settings. These settings generally include schools, workplaces, restaurants, parking lots, public transit, even private parties that include at least some guests who are not family members of the shooter. Hawdon et al. 2012, states that mass shootings are particularly distressing and that not only were they acts of extreme violence, they all occurred in settings where violence of any kind is relatively rare. Furthermore, they also occurred in institutions-schools and a shopping mall-that are expected to be safe.

VICTIM PROFILE

One of the major characteristics of mass shootings is that the target is generally symbolic in nature. In other words, the perpetrator is not seeking to exact revenge on particular people, but they are rather looking to make a statement with violence-it may not matter who the ultimate victims are. This is in contrast to other types of inner city school violence, which often involves two or more individuals with specific grievances toward one another (Rocque, 2012).

According to the report conducted by Bjelopera et al. (2013), a killer's relationship to his or her victims is important. Perpetrators are usually driven by a desire for revenge and/or power; some killers may target family members or close friends. The incidents described in this report of public mass shootings, the gunmen cannot only kill such individuals. " This particularly rules out cases of domestic violence-instances only involving family members either inside or outside the home- from consideration as public mass shootings" (Bjelopera et al. 2013). As a result perpetrators in public mass shootings rather select their victims at random. " For example, a student assailant involved in a public mass shooting plans on killing particular teachers, while simultaneously staging a wider assault on his school" (Bjelopera et al. 2013).

CONCLUSION

Although mass shootings appear to afflict the United States more than most other countries, they are by no means a uniquely American phenomenon. "

In 1996 sixteen kindergarten children were shot and killed in Dunblane,
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Scotland, and in 2011 69 teenagers were killed on an island retreat in Norway” (Mesoudi, 2013).

This essay has discussed how social psychology theory of aggression can be applied to mass shootings. The essay described aggression and its cause, and then later applied the theory into the practical example of mass shootings.

This essay shows how perpetrators of mass killings generally seem to share a similar physical appearance; they tend to be white males. Psychological influences include loss before the incident, depression, suicidal thoughts, frustration and the intake of psychotropic drugs, such as SSRI. The social factors that seem to influence the majority of perpetrators include social rejection, isolation, low social status, precipitating events, imitation as well as the construction of masculinity. External factors that may lead to or influence mass shooting include violent media, such as violent movies, music, video games and books. Perpetrators prior to incident tend to have a fascination with guns and bombs. Mass shootings generally take place in public settings, like schools, malls, parking lots etc. It seems as though certain perpetrators may select the victims and in others they do not.

There are a number of variables that lead to mass shootings, many of which can be prevent or sufficiently dealt with. Mass shootings have devastating results on communities, as a result society as a whole needs to unite to prevent these incidents from reoccurring.