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A theory of intimate massacres: Steps toward a causal explanation

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Abstract

School shootings and other attacks that indiscriminately target victims pose special challenges for explanation. Their rarity, enigmatic psychology, and media appeal make it difficult to define the phenomena-to-be-explained in ways well suited for discovering persuasive etiological processes. Here theory in criminology has an especially valuable role to play. Working from general principles for interactively defining the problem to be explained and for developing explanatory hypotheses, I offer an explanation of 'intimate massacres' as the upshot of three contingencies: the pursuit of a point of no return; a project of destroying one's personification in a given place; and a compelling desire to transform emotional chaos into a crystallized line of irresistible action. Once the motivation in the foreground of intimate massacres is understood, the relationship of these events to biographical and social ecological background factors will be comprehended in ways that contest the associations often suggested by folk sociology.

Keywords

Crime, criminology, criminology theory, defining crime, emotions, etiology, interactionism, massacres, school shootings, violence

Indiscriminate shootings of children in schools raise excruciating challenges for social researchers. There is the difficulty presented by the rarity of the events relative to the ubiquity of the usual factors invoked in explanations. There is the daunting prospect of finding the motivating dynamics in extraordinarily idiosyncratic psyches. And the trauma

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experienced by those close to the scene will usually block access to reliable information on the attacker's prior social relationships.

But the greatest problem may be posed by the social forces that define the matter to be explained, the 'explanandum', in response to the mass emotions and partisan political interests that journalism stirs up. The news media require a typification to launch a story. The public absorbs crimes as an instance of a pre-designed class, as 'another' school shooting, act of terrorism, instance of going postal, gang attack, and so on. If the popular categorizations can be resisted, the logic for proceeding toward a more empirically accurate conceptualization of the offender's perspective will be familiar.

That logic has been known in academic sociology as analytic induction. Without the benefit of a guiding rubric, the same logic is routine in the humanities (Katz, 2001, 2015). Analytic induction is as much concerned with discovering and specifying the explanandum as with assessing candidates for explanation. Each fact, case or instance is examined in relation to others, with the researcher adjusting the definitions of the explanandum and of the explanans interactively. The result will be to separate out various subsets of what law enforcement and popular culture lump as one phenomenon, and the inclusion in the explanandum of cases conventionally treated as distinct.

I reformulate the phenomena usually glossed as 'school shootings' with a conception of 'intimate massacres': 'intimate' because the site targeted has biographical meaning to the attacker, as terrorist attacks do not, 'massacre' because, unlike revenge attacks, there is an indiscriminate targeting of victims. The category of intimate massacres covers not all but many shootings in schools as well as many attacks in workplaces, shopping malls, airports and other non-domestic sites where the assailant had or imagined he had suffered degradation.

As news coverage will have proposed an initial set of cases to explain, this sampling can be taken as a starting point. But it is not as obvious where to search for etiological processes. One solution is to use a theory of social ontology. Social ontology describes the constitution of all instances of social life, the distinguishable if empirically interrelated processes that create the atoms with which each social moment is composed (see Katz, 2002).

The theory proposed here is based on the understanding that each subjectively discrete instance of social life is produced through a unique combination of interaction-adjusted behavior, sequentially specified behavior, and embodiment or materialization. Each experientially distinguishable moment of social life is situated socially by the way that the individuals involved take into account how producing one or another line of action will be seen and responded to by others; as each fits the action-to-be-produced to what in his or her understanding has happened just before and is likely to happen just after; and as each actor syntactically incorporates resources found at hand in the intertwining of his or her body and of the immediate landscape.

If there is no instance of social life that is created other than through interaction, sequence, and embodiment, then any form of social life may be specified by documenting the unique aspects of each of these three processes and their interrelations. For example every moment of driving a car is socially situated by the individual taking into account whether and how pedestrians and other drivers will or will not see and respond to a signal, an acceleration, or a change of path; by appreciating an ever-changing

distance from origin and destination point, such as by grasping an exit ramp, hill, or building as an asymptote marking progress in the trip's trajectory; and by incorporating the vehicle as an unselfconscious extension of one's body that intertwines body and landscape of action, and which sets up the possible experience of another car, many yards ahead, as *being* 'cut off' (Katz, 1999).

Drawing on case histories of school and workplace shootings, terrorist acts, hostage takings, gang violence, and various forms of street crime, I will illustrate the inquiry that pursuit of these three questions sets up. The definition of the explanandum is an 'intimate massacre'. The explanation of the sequential meaning that an intimate massacre has for the offender is that of *passing a point of no return* in his biography. My working hypothesis about the interaction process is that the offender is trying to *destroy his personification by others*, as opposed to creating a new self. The emotional dynamic that I propose is a transformation *from private chaos to a crystallization of emotions* in the execution of a succinct, histrionic, public, irreversible narrative.

The claims that follow are efforts to grasp how people work up an appreciation of a distinctive kind of violence that they find compelling and which one day they attempt to realize. We cannot know who will try an intimate massacre until one has been attempted. But the fact that a form of behavior does not have predictors does not mean that all explanations of it must be circular. Causal explanation may be retrodictive, specifying what will have occurred in the lead up to a given instance (see Lieberman and Lynn, 2002, protesting the view that "science" requires forward looking prediction).

If we assume that people cannot stop making sense (with possible exceptions created by dedicated practices of meditation, some aesthetic engagements, dream-bereft stages of sleep, and what some chemicals can do to the mind), we are led to begin explaining any distinctive form of behavior by asking: what are they trying to do by acting in that way? The decisive consideration behind this writing is that there is a coherent if inchoate meaning guiding many school, workplace, and public location attacks, a meaning that is not wholly invented in the moment but built up over time. We may search for the natural history of this form of social life much as we might any other.

Sequential actions indicating a projected point of no return

Comparing various forms of violence, we may ask how the attacker in each situates the meaning of the act biographically. What does the event mean as a phase linking his (rarely her) past and future? Various details indicate that those who try to commit intimate massacres are seeking a point of no return. What they are trying to do is achieve an irreversible transformation of identity by negating their past in an ineradicable way, without pointing coherently or in a readily interpretable manner toward their future.

Intimate massacres are focused on a setting in which the attacker had, or imagines he had, a deeply personal involvement. These attacks are not random in the choice of place or population targeted. They are attacks on a place which, the offender understands, harbors a version of his identity, even if he has not been there for a long while. At the site, the attacker will have been a student, worker, or client.

Intimate massacres may target specific individuals who have offended, bullied, or abused the offender, but those are not their only targets. In contrast, when attackers seek

revenge, they focus on particular others and prior offenses. Revenge attacks seek to redefine the past as a means for outlining a future, one in which scores will have been settled, the avenger will no longer be seen as vulnerable (punk, trash, innocuous) but, now feared, ready to begin a new phase of socially grounded life. Those who shoot randomly targeted strangers along with people they regard as personal enemies are loosening the link between their past and their future.

Avengers know that they have no guarantee that their scores will settle. In schools, prisons, gang neighborhoods, or clan-dominated regions, those who seek revenge know that they must run the risk of another round of attacks requiring yet another round of revenge. Punk and bully are mutually implicated, often alternating identities. Avengers can hope but cannot expect that their attack will become a point of no return.

Revenge is a high risk bet on a future to be lived in a self resurrected from one that had been diminished in the past. Failure is possible in many ways: hitting the wrong victim, missing or minimally harming and thus leaving the victim capable of responding immediately, evoking devastating subsequent attacks from the victim's associates. Those attempting intimate massacres will not take those risks.

As outrageous and daring as their actions may seem, in comparison with other forms of violence, and indeed in comparison with their non-violent peers who measure success through self-reflections on daily interactions, the assailants who would enact intimate massacres refuse to wager their future. Once he has a grand plan, which may develop long before the event, the assailant can dismiss everyday interactions as too insignificant to become humiliating. And once launched, the attack achieves success, where success is defined as passing a point of no return, regardless of the magnitude of the harm produced and independent of the victims' specific identities. The attack guarantees that the assailant's future will not repeat his past, whatever the immediate outcome.

While the public differentiates between assaults that harm dozens versus those that harm few, and the news media, in the most spectacular cases, detail the identities of each victim, there is no evidence that those who attempt to murder numerous school, work, or other peers calculate their success in the precise numbers fatally hit. School and workplace attackers generate magnitudes of fear that are only roughly related to measures of destructive results. Like terrorists, the site chosen builds the significance of the attack.

Attacks undertaken to be seen as part of a campaign of terror will permanently alter how the attacker is seen by many others. But in the attacker's mind they are revelations, proofs of commitment to a version of self that has been cultivated in social circles of like-minded fellow travelers. In contrast, those who commit intimate massacres leap beyond their past. Alone or, rarely, with a partner, the attack breaks with all prior associates, who are left wondering how this could have occurred.

Terrorists attack targets that had become precious in folk sociology. The attack may be the first time that the attackers are present at the site, which terrorists appreciate when they study locations so as not to make the logistical mistakes that commonly trip up first-time visitors. The terrorist's targets are people at places regarded as iconic of communal identity: not only the young people but the camp that is seen as socializing young people into a political ideology that defines the nation; shrines honored by pilgrimages according to religious calendars, which ironically facilitate the planning of a mass attack; high profile financial buildings that symbolize dominant status. The terrorist takes strength

for the point he would make by attacking foundations of the victims' mythical beliefs about what sustains them as a society. Whether religious or secular, terrorists are iconoclasts who direct their violence to declare 'your gods will serve my purpose'. In their strategic planning, terrorists revel in kidnapping the future reflections that predictably will be shed by institutionalized symbols.

Like terrorists, those who act alone to take hostages are not solely focused on ending past identities, but their orientation to the future is more selfish. If terrorists are altruistic in offering a future to others that they deny to themselves, hostage takers typically seek to draw attention to a grievance that they wish to resolve in order to make a new foundation for their lives. After the US police decided to end policies that gave priority to SWAT-team intervention, it became apparent that hostage takers almost always could be talked out of the situation without harm either to their victims or to themselves (Rogan and Lanceley, 2010). Negotiations in hostage-taking situations focus on connecting the outcome of the situation to prior and ongoing themes in the kidnapper's life.

As in intimate massacres, hostage takers target strangers at sites that often have been meaningful in the offender's biography, and they frequently start without a clear post-event strategy. But they are not committed to abandoning their prior lives: hostage takers can anticipate the necessity of communicating with those kidnapped, and they are open to conversation with representatives of authority. The hostage taker is not clearly seeking an event that breaks with the past but a way to get to a future he can readily envision through a path that he cannot make out.

Terrorism is a first for the attacker in a spatial but not a temporal sense. Terrorists practice enacting attacks but not in the place that will be attacked. They rehearse, even in full dress, but not on the stage of the critical performance.

In contrast, in an intimate massacre the attacker does a first in a temporal sense but in a place whose spaces he has often traversed. If the school he attended, the business he worked in, or the mall he frequented is closed that day, if the movie theater is not showing the drama that makes his costume a fitting part, he does not choose an alternative, as might terrorists, young men looking for a fight (Jackson-Jacobs, 2013), or convenience store robbers. Our difficulty in making sense of intimate massacres in part comes from the attacker's narcissistic perspective on a site as reflecting his identity, even while everyone else sees the site as mundane or as important only in comic book fantasies.

Although they are first time attacks, intimate massacres are not spontaneous outbursts. On the one hand, they require preparation in planning and gathering instruments of violence. On the other, the project is anticipated as a one off. In some cases, attackers bring multiple weapons, indicating their anticipation that the drama will not simply be a script enacted but an improvisation.

Attackers trying to commit an intimate massacre generally do not commit the act as a progressive step in a series of prior, individually targeted attacks on people at the scene of the attack. The attackers emerge from awkward and sometimes from intimidating prior relationships to some of the victims but in the act they leap beyond their prior relationships. In this respect they contrast with the much more common pattern of youth violence in low income neighborhoods, where shootings are comprehensible by referencing a series of prior violent acts and intimidations. In contrast to domestic and peer violence, intimate massacres convey a mystery about motivations that should not be

understood as a failure of understanding on the part of others—family, peers, school administrators, employers, research analysts—but as part of the objective of the act.

Intimate massacres are multiply intimate. The attack makes use of detailed knowledge of the targeted place. The attack also is intimate in its wastefulness. Putting aside the costs to victims, considering the act only from the standpoint of the performer, it is a very short run production of a performance that is designed for a particular theater. Terrorist training is done like summer theater, in cheap, rural areas, in tents if not barns; and the graduates may then be deployed onto a world-wide chain of iconic stages. For their production and distribution economies, terrorist training camps are attractive institutions for charitable contributors, who in effect are pre-purchasing tickets for viewing a series of productions that will be aired on an as yet unspecified calendar. But who besides the attacker would invest in a one-off school or workplace shooting?

At another level of intimacy, school and workplace shootings have closely held meanings. Younger attackers may think in terms of ‘now they will be sorry for what they did to me’. Older assailants are more likely to appreciate the psychological depth of inquiry that a mass attack will stimulate. Researchers, unable to get information from the attacker because he is dead, speaking incoherently, or otherwise inaccessible for interview, will, like media personnel, contact any acquaintance who may be available. Given that family members are often also inaccessible, the search for informants is likely to run through the community environment. As those who were closest to the attacker tend to remain silent, and as those who speak tend to have been distant from the attacker, inquiries are biased toward a portrait of the individual as having been in only fleeting relationships. And even when people at the site attacked—coworkers, student peers, teachers—can give a rounded portrait of the attacker, the effect usually is to frame an enigma.

At a fourth level of intimacy, intimate massacres are often the finale to long prequels. Relative to more typical violent outbursts, which occur when domestic, acquaintance, robbery, or drug transactions become character contests, intimate massacres are not spur-of-the-moment responses. To the victims they come out of the blue but to the attackers they culminate pre-assault stages of engagement.

Often in private, the attacker plays with symbols of dread, trying on intimidating identities through impersonalized, avatar disguised, on-line interactions. In another pre-attack phase of preparation, the attacker must gather weapons for the assault. This is especially true of attackers under the age of 18 who do not have guns at hand as of right. The playing with violent games and the acquisition of weapons merge into the quest theme that is commonly used to structure game narratives. Continuing a tradition that goes back at least to the Perseus myth, the hero acquires the fantastical powers that make the attack seem possible. If these are not given at conception (Hercules) or by a disaster in early childhood (Superman), they must be obtained through risky strategic action. For adolescents, getting weaponry will often require deceiving adults, breaking into secured locations, and then surmounting the challenges of transporting equipment in ways that avoid detection.

The quest often produces devices that will support alternative scenarios. Young attackers sometimes carry multiple weapons and extensive ammunition, all of which they cannot conceivably employ. The phase of secret preparation means that when the attack becomes an event, it will have a private meaning as the successful accomplishment of

certain pre-stages and a discarding of the value of others. Only James Bond gets to use all the special equipment prepared for him. In mass assaults, the attacker commonly accomplishes a point of no return in that many of his preparations are left unexploited, never to be accessed again.

To appreciate the meaning of intimate massacres as points of no return, it is useful to consider how lives are led such that they avoid such fateful moments. Life seems full of possibilities when one can look back on efforts and personal relationships that were salient for a while and then abandoned, and reengage them as resources in a new, previously unexpected phase of personal development. After 10 years of striving to be an actor, karate classes, paid for by parents in one's adolescence, become the basis for developing a new line of work. New romantic relationships may be started by turning back to neighborhood, school, religious, or work-based relationships that have not been continuously sustained. An ethnographer may record and set aside fieldnotes, only to realize their utility years later when engaged in a new writing project. When people are aware that, for reinventing a self, they possess previously acquired but unexploited resources, even failed new ventures need not become points of no return because, in the relationships developed and social knowledge acquired, they promise to become resources for later new beginnings, albeit in currently unspecifiable ways.

It is striking that attackers trying to commit intimate massacres draw on so little of their past as resources for the project of violence. This is true not only for the very young school shooters, who, when they pull in peers, collaborate with recent associates. It is also the case with university shooters and workplace attackers. They draw on what is at hand: the places they are currently occupying or have recently left; rhetoric that is circulating in popular culture at the moment; weapons with which they are barely familiar. Intimate massacres represent points of no return not only as an emotional matter, not only because of how law enforcement and the community will respond after the event, but because, as a practical matter, they reach only in a shallow way into the attacker's background. These acts of violence close rather than open up possibilities.

Why a massacre? Place and person in a delaminated identity

Considered as the insertion of a phase in a biography, the practical project of an intimate massacre is to achieve a point of no return. The attacker abandons his prior identity in a way that is not subject to resurrection. But if intimate meaning is essential, why is it necessary to massacre? Even if attacks at no other site will do, why not target only particular victims who are at the uniquely significant place?

In order to understand the imprecise range of harm that motivates the attacker's project, it is necessary to analyze the attackers' distinctive perspective on social interaction. Here we need a brief discussion of the nature of individual identity as an existentially problematic lamination. For everyone, the layers in the ongoing lamination of identity arise in constantly dynamic interrelationships.

Individual identity is formed and constantly reformed in the relationship between self, or who one is in one's actions toward others, and person, or who one is in others' actions toward oneself (Erikson, 1957; Goffman, 1971: 335–379). Lamination of self and person

is never perfect, never finally formed. Sometimes one is treated as unrealistically competent. This is critical to language acquisition: mother responds to neonate's audible utterances as if they were competent forms of speech; the young child learns to complement the identity the child is optimistically treated as already having; language is learned without the novice ever experiencing the doubts about ability to learn which afflict adults who would acquire competency in a second language. Sometimes expectations are innocently laid on people who are not prepared to deliver on the expectations. When teachers address students as 'Mr X' or 'Ms Y', many will sense that they are being called out of adolescent worlds where they are known by first names or nicknames, into adult-styled performances which they may feel unprepared to enact with the expected combination of gravity and grace.

No one simply 'has' a smoothly laminated identity. For everybody, at some moments identity becomes delaminated. The experience may be harmless, as it is for people who, without benefit of mobile phone, talk in public to others no one else can hear or see. Such people are not so different. Everyone cultivates and even invents others who evoke and complement selves they wish to enact. It may be a pet that responds to the owner's return home with what is interpreted as delight. It may be the use of software that learns one's typical errors and corrects mistyping and misspelling without asking each time whether the assistance is desired, and that will never demand credit for any positive response one receives for 'good writing'. It may be clothing that conveys to outsiders a more attractive form than one thinks would be observed if what is inside could be seen. Everyone relies on such cheats.

Attackers bent on accomplishing intimate massacres are geared toward negating a specific side of identity. They seek to destroy the way they have been personified without developing a self that will transcend the event by charting a course of conduct they can later enact. What is to be destroyed is not the prior self and not the whole of one's identity but just the person others have assumed one to be. The project is at its essence a compromised form of suicide.

Now we may begin to see the logic of seeking to accomplish a massacre. That project makes sense when an intolerable personification has become part of a persisting place. Where does that happen, and how?

Schools are powerful identity-conferring places. Their pedagogical justifications speak of cultivating talents and the love of learning; that is, changing the individual from inside out. But their tactics work from the outside in.

It is in a way no more mysterious why someone should attack a school's population promiscuously, in order to negate the way he senses that the place has personified him, than it is to understand how the accomplishments of a school's teams could be celebrated with deep passion across 'the student body'. For a school shooter, indignities suffered at the hands of a very few are sensed as representing how all see him. For the school booster, the personal accomplishments of a very few are taken unblushingly to personify him as they do all others affiliated with the school. Equally as striking, one school team's victories cast no prideful light on anyone affiliated with other schools. Being in the place personifies students in the schools of winning teams, just by virtue of having the formal right to be there.

Middle schools, high schools, universities, and work places are not 'total institutions', because members leave at night and take weekends off. Still, such organizations typically

go beyond narrow functional relations and seek to characterize members morally. Not all places do. Even among schools, we can distinguish between those that lay identities on students in deep and precisely differentiating versus superficial and crude ways.

Driving schools, cosmetics institutes, barber colleges, swimming classes, extension courses in bonsai gardening, and so on, do not usually play the national anthem, raise and lower the flag on a formal schedule, require pledges of allegiance, or keep historic records of how their sports teams fared. Students in such places are often graded, not finely but in binary fashion: pass/fail, degree earned or not. Students in technical schools often get evaluated, if at all, by some other institution, which either hires them or not, or which either does or does not grant them a license.

Middle schools, high schools, and universities differentiate students more finely, even to several decimal places. Also, these educational organizations are created and maintained in ways that tie them in to the community. It is not irrational for students to understand emotionally that personal attacks on them and judgments of low academic performance pierce deeply and seal one's identity in the eyes of the community as a whole.

The objective of indiscriminate violence is to reverse the social logic of the institution attacked. Commentators and researchers neglect the diffuse nature of the attack when they emphasize bullying in the background of school shootings. Not only does bullying fail to make sense of the indifferent choice of victims, in some cases it was the attackers who were the bullies. In other cases there is no personal history that would fit the bully scenario. More to the point, where attackers had been bullied, it may be—this is never considered, or at least, conceded—that peers had perceived an unsettling inclination that was already present, and which bullying may suppress more often than exacerbate. In sum, where bullying was catalytic, the provocation was not rooted in the bullying but in the individual's understanding of how he is personified in peer culture.

When explanation focuses on the identities of the victims, on what they may have done to the offender, or on the presumed rage of the attacker, the missing analytic step is the lodging of identity in place. The assailant's randomness in selecting victims becomes explicable when we appreciate that victims are being attacked by virtue of their connection to place. Anyone on the premises during the attack becomes vulnerable.

As bizarre as this psychology initially may seem to be, the embedding of identity in place is a routine feature of everyday social life. There is gossip in both adolescent and adult workplace settings. While not eternal, gossip-sustained defamation has a trans-cohort life which keeps reputations alive in a place even as some defamers cycle out and others enter. In most workplaces, decision making is diffused and difficult to pin to specific officials, whom everyone knows are just the spokespersons for those who wield power from more insulated positions. Who should one kill after a denial of tenure? Confidentiality rules impair knowing one's most dedicated enemies with certainty. It makes good sociological sense to attack everyone in the department.

Intimate massacres are attempts to negate a negation. In that respect they are not simply nihilistic. And yet they also are self-destructive, half suicides that kill any possibility of building a future identity. Attackers typically make little if any effort to escape. Unlike terrorists, they do see themselves as part of a network that will carry on their grievances after they are gone. Increasingly, school shooters reference other school shooters in the

writings they leave and the internet sites they have visited. But—and here we can distinguish attackers like Breivik who issued a manifesto aligning himself with an anti-immigrant, anti-Left party—there is little that they make available to show that their attack is a contribution to a cause.

Nor is their research into other similar acts well understood as a matter of ‘imitation’ or of seeking ‘scripts’ (see DeJong et al., 2003: 97). The *modus operandi* in each school and each workplace shooting is unique. The practice of consulting what others have done is better understood as a way of familiarizing oneself with genre. Like some contemporary moviemakers, for example, Quentin Tarantino, and painters, for example Kehinde Wiley, assailants doing intimate massacres often overtly reference past cognate and master works, not to make the same statement, not in mindless, slavish or weak willed imitation, but as a narrative resource for a unique expression. Using an identifiable genre, the author can reasonably anticipate how observers of the act will understand it. The shooting becomes ‘another Columbine’ and thus achieves efficacy even if, unlike Columbine, it is a solo effort, and even if relatively few are killed.

The attacker’s project is to associate great efficacy with himself. A manifestation of efficacy is the only aspect of self-construction that runs through the cases. Here is the key to why intimate massacres, like so many other forms of unprovoked violence, are seductive almost exclusively to post-pubescent young males. As a sexual metaphor, masculinity is, in the most primordial sense, unarguably established by an explosive interjection that irreversibly reshapes another’s world. The attacker, inspired by an eroticized, metaphorically fertile understanding of biological fact, is drawn to sudden penetrations of others’ worlds that can produce objective proof of efficacy, without the necessity of negotiating consent, without the necessity of caring about or caring for the consequences. Intimate massacres fit within a semiotic range of acts of profitless violence against strangers, all of which attest to a sensibility that is at once brutal and poetic.

That the attacker has limited his dramatic project to destroying a personification is evident not only in the absence of a reasoned escape plan but in the related absence of realistic plans for subsequent actions of the same sort. A serial assailant like Ted Kaczynski was a different kind of school attacker. He mailed letter bombs to university-related targets working in his field of science. Kaczynski worked alone and incognito, and was successful for an extended period of time. His *modus operandi* reached deeply into his past, each attack privately reflecting his PhD-level sophistication.

There is no shortage of alternative genres available to, and foregone by, those committing intimate massacres. Arguably a much cooler genre, one self-indicating a deep-seated competency for planning and control, was employed by the Beltway snipers, a team composed of an older man and a young sidekick (John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo) that succeeded in killing 17 strangers, mostly by single shots taken from a distance. But if a series of single incidents is to amount to the massacre levels that may be achieved instantly in school and workplace shootings, the attacker must develop a new killer self over an extended period of time.

Intimate massacres are self-destructive. If the attacker’s life goes on and is examined for the meaning of the attack, the massacre either becomes pointless, absurd, or in some sad sense, a joke. Whether conceiving himself as a Rambo, which is more likely the case with younger attackers, or as a tragic figure, which is more likely the case with older

attackers, the assailant does not shape intimate massacres as a step toward a future envisioned in the mundane world (Newman, 2013: 67–68). Unable to see themselves in the future, the assailants may appreciate the self-destructive, self-mocking dimensions of the act. Some, playing to a buddy co-assailant, even laugh their way through it.

We may contrast the temporal implications of different courses of violent action. At one extreme, an initial, relatively modest intervention in a victim's life commits one to a more destructive intervention, which in turn sets up provocations to a yet more harmful violation, which then becomes a situation in which murder makes compelling sense. A self-conceived thief enters a parking lot with the thought of taking property from a car. He finds a driver retrieving keys from a handbag. Finding the means to steal the car unexpectedly at hand, he takes it. To avoid making a scene and leaving a witness, he also takes the driver. Having successfully avoided suspicion when exiting the parking lot—security camera photographs show him in the passenger seat and the victim driving with no obvious fear in her expression—they go to an isolated spot where he can figure out what to do. Once there, the opportunity to rape becomes irresistible: having kidnapped, rape will add minimal additional culpability. In the cold silence that follows, he realizes the greatly enhanced value of eliminating the witness. This sequence—*theft of radio becomes theft of car becomes kidnapping becomes rape becomes murder*—describes a progression toward an ever more violent identity.

On the opposite end of the scale, an initial crime will culminate the life leading up to it. After the assailant has shot a number of passive victims in a precious place like an elementary school, any subsequent action—an escape, a battle with armed professionals, the theft of a getaway car, an attack on a potential witness—can only detract from the achievement already made. And any of these subsequent steps may be bungled. The initial attack is so extraordinarily terrible that it defines a self that cannot be transcended. It would take a great deal of help, say from a terrorist network, to chart out a future in which such an attack could lead to an even more glorious future.

Best to stop then and there. Ending the course of violence in the massacre will, in the current colloquial sense of the phrase, blow up (inflate) the self that had been lived before, elevating the attack to the magnitude of a great mystery. Now, as one's past life comes under meticulous review, hidden preparations will emerge. Without a clear statement of the motivation behind the act, scribbled notes and web activities will have to be searched for clues. It becomes clear that many others were deceived: they had no clue. Somewhere in the pre-event biography is the reflexive, quantitative-to-qualitative, emotional conversion logic that attackers in intimate massacres share with terrorists: the extent of the destruction I have caused measures the depth of harm you have inflicted on me. As a future self is sacrificed, the self in the past is made profound. Now they will listen, and listen hard. At its most grandiose, violence is paradoxically truncated, cryptic, muted: they will have to struggle to hear.

Intimate massacres are in the first instance murders of one of the sides of social identity, how one was seen by others. Especially for older assailants, workplace attacks are ways to make suicide respectable. The self is sacrificed, not as a confession of failure but as the bathetic cost of ending unjust treatment.

From the assailant's standpoint, the worst result would be handing off the definition of his life to other narrators, who would inevitably underline the humiliating perspectives

on the assailant's pre-attack life that he sought to escape. That is why it makes sense before arriving at the attack site to destroy evidence that another narrator might use. Young attackers may find it necessary to kill the most powerful narrator, the one who predictably would be the first consulted for explanation. The act, not mother, should have the final word.

From chaos to crystallization

School and workplace shootings are predictably seen as the result of mental illness. But even if insanity is the cause, the cause of the insanity likely lies in the long past. We have to search for a discriminating cause, which leads us to search for the attraction that makes intimate massacres compelling to assailants in the event. The insanity label risks overseeing patterns that run across cases. Even if the event becomes compelling through creative narcissistic reflections that will escape everyone else, there are indicators of a common motivation animating diverse, unconnected attackers.

A starting point for penetrating the emotional attractions of intimate massacres is the very fact that they make at least momentary sense to the assailants in ways they do not to anyone else. That is not the case in the typical criminal homicide, which depends for motivation on an agreement among disputants that something terribly important is at stake, whether the consensus be about personal honor, one's own physical integrity (when killings emerge out of fights), control of contraband markets, or loyalty to associates. Terrorism is also collaborative in this respect. It is not especially creative for a terrorist to attack the Boston Marathon, the World Trade Center, or the main federal government building in Oklahoma City. Terrorists rely on institutionalized icons of communal identity. Intimate massacres in schools and workplaces partly rely on communal assumptions that the place of attack is critical to collective identity, but they also depend on more idiosyncratic meanings that give personal relevance to the place attacked.

Often in the near background there is a catalytic injury to the assailant's dignity. A student receives failing grades or is dropped from the university. A girlfriend ends a relationship that was alive, albeit alive more in the attacker's mind than in hers. A worker knows he is being called in to be fired. A stalker receives notice of an injunction. These are valuable clues. We may understand that the rejected person—Katherine Newman and Cybelle Fox (2009), rejecting 'loner', write of 'failed joiners'—is at a 'now or never' moment in his personal struggles. Put in a more positive way, the attacker takes the rejection as confirming what is at stake: finally, others collaborate in saying that something now must be done, conveying the message, 'you are at a turning point'. But if the common presence of catalysts cannot be ignored, they only intensify the mystery about the emotional context in which not uncommon events can lead to extraordinary violence.

Consider the difference between introducing oneself into a situation that is already violent and introducing violence into a situation, between entering a chaotic situation and bringing in chaos. In the USA, the police usually enact violence in situations that are already messy, often already violent. As Egon Bittner (1979) concluded from his studies of patrolmen, the essential and distinctive role of the police is to impose order on situational chaos, for example when called to enter situations of domestic conflict, when behavior on skid row becomes too threatening to ignore, when barroom brawls lead

bystanders to call the police. The police are the only people in contemporary western society who are authorized to use force to insist that any objections be deferred to a later time and another place: 'tell it to the judge'. To put it in another colloquial form, the police uniquely can legally make people 'shut up'.

In contrast, assailants begin intimate massacres with pre-made plans to create chaos in tranquil settings and then to impose order through violence. They bring specific weaponry that they usually do not carry and they come with at least the roughly defined initial frames of a script of action that would control what will unfold. That what ensues is in fact chaotic is another matter. Terrorist actions sometimes achieve their pre-formulated objectives more or less precisely. School and workplace shooters almost never do. Still, what we need to understand is how such actions start and then develop. The assailant transforms his identity in the attack situation by creating and then transforming chaos.

The expectation of controlling chaos should be understood within the longer biographical trajectory from which the attack emerges. In that longer perspective, the assault emerges from a chaos with which the assailant had been struggling in virtually all of his other social relationships, even before any specific rejection that might be seen as catalytic.

The assailant's plan is ambitious. He would perform the first enactment of a script for action which has never been reviewed by any critic and has never been given a field trial much less a full dress rehearsal. The plan assumes the competent responsive performance of roles by a mass of victims whose first glimpse of the script will come only when the action begins, and who will very likely ad lib, as they will not be motivated to honor the author's intentions and keep to the program. Why would anyone attempt what is, relative to the elaborate drama that is anticipated, so likely to be a mess when actualized? Here we may borrow a key insight from the pragmatist-phenomenological tradition. Every course of action is a proposed solution to a challenge that animates it. What we as researchers can see is the upshot of a submerged struggling with a problem that the actor senses ('estimates', 'thinks', 'reasons' would be inaccurate) he must but cannot otherwise resolve.

From this line of thinking we get to the formulation that what the assailant is attempting to do in an intimate massacre is to crystallize chaos in a representation of order. The version of order that this form of violence will create is foreseeably brief. Assailants are not oblivious to the difficulties of their effort; there are no indications that they imagine that the order they impose will survive for long. The crystallization the assailant anticipates is like an icicle mysteriously formed on a torridly hot day. For a moment, the drama will enact and transcend chaos, inverting the challenge that the author/protagonist has been living. Achieving that extraordinary moment is enough.

In all the cases of intimate massacre that have been studied or that have received extensive news coverage, there is evidence of overt chaos in social relationships. Across cases there are patterns of assailants adorning themselves and playing with symbols that were:

- taken from violent, 'Goth' and necromantic fashions;
- a bricolage taken from more internally coherent orders, including Satanic, Nazi, survivalist, anti-government patriotic, and militia movements, prior intimate

massacres that have become more coherent in nostalgia than they were in their occurrence, the anti-discrimination branch of the civil rights movements;

- tropes taken from virtual media games and pop music genres, each of which at once celebrates destruction and promises transcendent unity by creating aesthetic consistency over a series of contest narratives or songs.

It is notable that university-level school shooters have disproportionately been first generation immigrants whose way of filtering US culture had struck their associates as somehow off. Across all the age, ethnic, and semiotic world differences in the backgrounds of those who attempt intimate massacres, we find objective evidence of hermeneutic chaos.

But, however well congealed chaos may become in the poet's or the painter's mythical imaginings, for the social researcher the concept does not dispel the darkness. There are many sorts of chaos in the situational and immediate personal background of criminal violence. Is there anything different about the wild feelings for which an intimate massacre becomes a proximate next step and momentarily compelling resolution?

Again it is useful to seek clues through comparative analysis. David Matza's concept of 'dizziness' is one of the few efforts by sociologists to understand the relationship between psychic turmoil and deviant behavior (Lemert, 1962; Matza, 1969). The concept is illustrated by the situational challenges faced by ex-convicts. Even when overtly accepted as behaving normally in everyday life, the ex-con (i.e. someone who has been publicly labeled as deviant and then officially released) struggles with accepting at face value how he is treated. It may seem to an observer that, when everyone else on the field treats him as just playing baseball, he is being embraced. It is the 'just' in the statement that is the problem, and the problem is unmanageable because it is metaphysical.

In the ex-con's understanding, when others are treating him as playing an inconsequential, socializing game, they are also seeing him as not doing something terrible. Their view, in his view, is that he is acting like a normal ballplayer in order to show he is to be trusted. He cannot determine whether or not the others are seeing his behavior solely within baseball's hermeneutics (making a good catch, committing an error, etc.) or also in a character-indicating way. If the latter, then he is just 'playing ball' ('playing ball' is an American colloquialism for deferentially going along with others): he is showing he is someone to be trusted. But if that is his purpose, he is playing in a cowardly manner, playing just to counter a demeaning view of himself. Seeing his otherwise inconsequential, everyday social life in this dualistic, metaphysical manner—as a doing that is also a non-doing—he can find no peace, even when he knows that what he is doing, when done by others, is 'just fun'. His situation becomes crazy making. Recidivism becomes a way to resolve the ambiguity and restore self-respect.

The ex-con's problems in legitimate society are not simply dealing with rejections that were based on stigma. The most intractable problem arises specifically when he is treated as fitting in. For those who attempt intimate massacres, the situation is the opposite. Some have been publicly stigmatized, not as criminals but as weak, weird, or 'fags'. More commonly they have become socially isolated: with no friends or only similarly 'weird' friends; rejected or abandoned by romantic partners; negatively reviewed or fired from jobs; suspended or kicked out of school; rebuffed even by right

wing groups or cliques of tough guys; awkward as an immigrant yet without ongoing incorporation into an active social life in either one's natal community or a network of co-ethnics. For many, mental health interventions or supervised drug treatments had been tried but abandoned.

Our subjects do not fit well into a frustration/aggression characterization, which works better when aggression follows a single central denial, refusal, insult, or arrival at a dead end. Their pre-assault lives better fit an image of spinning from one to another effort to construct a self that would receive a steady embrace in the complementary behavior of others. The attacker's pre-assault life shows a serial grasping among multiple symbolic systems in order to locate the outlines of an identity that could be filled out. In contrast, when the individual has consistently engaged with a given community's internally coherent symbolic system in an extended ante-bellum period, when the attack comes it will better fit the form of terrorism.

The ex-con's dizziness is a metaphysical matter, arising from a shifting back and forth from accepting to doubting and then to seeing disrespect spoiling apparent acceptance. The chaos behind intimate massacres is a more mobile matter, an upshot of spinning among situations, attempting and then abandoning integration in each. For the ex con, stigmatized labeling precedes and sets off paranoia, which destabilizes otherwise smooth integrations. For the assailants we are trying to understand, a public identity as awkward, impenetrable, loner, strange, or mentally ill grows from repeatedly aborted experiences to fit in.

'School shooting' arbitrarily inserts an age division within a homogeneous etiology. Those who are too old to be in school may follow the same path of chaos into workplace, airport, or shopping mall shootings. But reputational environments will likely differ by age. Adolescent societies in the West have standard categories for sorting out 'weird' peers. After high school, individuals are under less consistent oversight; at work and in everyday life they interact with a wider age range of disconnected others. Adults are more likely to escape public labeling completely. When intimate massacres occur in universities, the assailants often will have escaped any communal recognition as different. If they have had psychological treatment or drug therapy, it will have occurred in private; even if the fact of treatment is widely known, that will not distinguish the individual from large numbers of his peers.

But why should some individuals fail to make the connections that others do? Whatever the answer—if there is an answer—it is instructive to ask: of the many who similarly struggle with chaos, what is different about the very few who take the path to mounting an intimate massacre? If for them violence is attractive as re-presenting chaos by creating it in others' experience, the same is true for those who travel far more common routes into violence. Let us take those in chaos as a sample and investigate the social contingencies that shape different compelling paths into violence.

Nietzsche supplied an invaluable lead. We can characterize people as in chaos, not by invoking our notions of an ordered life but based on what they experience. Whether in dizzying paranoia or after hurtling from one aborted engagement to another, the individual becomes aware that the only consistency in his life is chaos, a kind of madness. Nietzsche understood that 'the criminal' is a way out of madness, however temporary the escape. (See the discussion in Katz, 1988: 274–276).

The criminal wants to embrace his madness, which is his social identity in the most profound sense, whether because of instability, schizophrenia in his intimate relationships, a racist Catch 22 in his biography, extraordinarily bad luck, or otherwise. Conventional thought sees the criminal and then looks for something that went wrong which might be righted. Like religions (Christianity, at least) which hold out the hope for salvation, conventional thought balks at stopping analysis when it finds chaos in an individual's life; it insists on asking 'what caused that?' So too does the criminal, who, in trying to understand and get control over chaos, finds conventional thought readily at hand. So he steals in order to kill. Ashamed of his madness—that is, the chaos that is his life—he tries to make sense of it by denying it, by using it as an instrument for what others in general will understand as a reasonable if damnable objective.

We punish robbers but do not usually see them as mad. Indeed, by allowing 'insanity' as a defense, when we adjudge people as criminal, we choose to see them as sane. Criminals have good reasons. We understand that poverty, discrimination, peer pressure, neighborhood traditions, and so on press many young men to rob. These causes become good guides for shaping ameliorative programs.

Those caught using violence to steal will be punished as robbers. But, Nietzsche warns us, they are stealing in order to have a respectable cover for being violent. The respectability they achieve is relative to what they would appear to be, should they embrace their madness, which they could do by killing outside of the context of robbery.

Consider where youth violence is most prevalent in the USA. Not in the small town and suburban, relatively ordered settings where almost all intimate massacres take place but in inner city, minority population, low income areas. Here chaotic lives are characterized by absent fathers, violence at home, insecurity about everyday needs for shelter and other necessities, rapidly and unpredictably changing actors in the domestic environment, daily threats of fatal violence from peers, pervasive challenges to authority and disorderly classrooms at schools that have chronically high rates of staff turnover (Pauille, 2013), and large scale involvement in underground markets subject to the sudden interventions of law enforcement authority that put young men recurrently 'on the run' (Goffman, 2014). Yet there are virtually no cases of 'rampage'-like shootings in the chaotic urban environments where adolescent criminal violence is high.

We can understand the social ecology behind the etiology of intimate massacres if we focus on the locally available ways of making sense of personally suffered chaos. It is not that youth in well-ordered, low crime social areas face special pressures that breed the emotional dynamics leading to intimate massacres but that in such communities, those in chaos do not find institutionalized forms of violence in which to mask their madness. A close examination of violence in the youth circles of inner city US poverty will show numerous rational reasons for violence, even while, in the cold calculations that come after the fact, the violence is also 'senseless'.

Most of the gun violence in 'the ghetto' is over-determined. In any given incident there may be good reasons to shoot another youth without immediate provocation because of: gang rivalries; insults received days earlier, which if not rejected with violence will undermine the shooter's reputation and lead to additional insults; self-defense

based on ongoing personal threats; resistance to enforcing a claim for the repayment of debt; the utility of intimidating a potential snitch; the value of gaining status by attacking the victim on behalf of a third party who is vulnerable on any of the above grounds, and so on (e.g. Hagan et al., 2003). The conventional interpretation, routinely made by those in the milieu itself and by social researchers who analyze from afar, is that one or more of these reasons must be the cause. The police commonly rest comfortable with the understanding that the gang affiliations of the assailant or the victim justify a characterization of gang violence. Once an event has been labeled gang violence, the convention is to understand that one has the explanation. But for a young person in an inner city poverty neighborhood who is bent on violence as a personal way of making sense of the chaos in his emotional life, a gang is not a cause, it is a vehicle. Gangs are where such youths belong (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2003).

In neighborhoods with ongoing, high levels of youth violence, assailants have no need to crystallize chaos in spectacular mass attacks. Youth violence in such settings emerges surrounded with causal explanations. Murderous attacks on others, including strangers, become prisms through which local observers and intellectual commentators find all of the conventionally cited causes of social problems in inner city, low income, minority neighborhoods.

In communities which appear to be well ordered, privately suffered chaos has no institutionalized vehicles for expression. Violent crime rates are low, school attendance is high, and youth gang activity is tolerated in sartorial and other symbolic claims but not in violence. In such settings, personal crazy looks socially weird.

Once we take the assailant's side and appreciate his dilemma of narrative construction, we can understand intimate massacres, at least the school shootings among them, as youth fads. As a practical matter, as physical performances, massacres are no more extraordinary than moving a finger a matter of centimeters. They are much less demanding of interaction skill than robbing individuals on the street or clerks in stores, where the assailant must guide the victim to perform compliant behavior that will deliver the desired payoff. Compared to the enactment of the behavior that constitutes the attacks in intimate massacres, adolescents spend more time and develop more skill in styling their hair. School shootings rise and fall according to the unpredictable dynamics that shape fads. Like street racing, school shootings challenge our ability to understand them because of the radical difference between the moral gravity of their consequences and the lightness of the cultural motifs that are grasped as vehicles for their performance.

Blaming a theme in current movies, hip hop music, or some other fad in popular culture is tempting because there will always be an example at hand. For the same reason, such explanations are only temporarily convincing. There is always enough violent material in popular culture for young people to embrace, and when they are violent they will use some collective theme to motivate attacks. After 'Columbine', school shootings themselves became a trope in popular culture. But this is a highly competitive market and any specific form of culturally romanticized violence that is embraced should be expected to fall, as do other fads in popular culture.

The etiology of school shootings at a collective level should not be separated from an understanding of the dynamics of youth culture as a whole. Most trends and fashions in

youth culture are innocuous. But that does not mean that the motifs seized upon by young people trying to make sense of dizzying emotions on their own, in environments where there are no gangs or other ongoing, locally grounded cultures of violence to grab onto, who look to their computers and mass communication to find identity forms they might try on, are any less subject to rapid rises and declines in appeal. We have to accept the absurdity of intimate massacres in order to explain them. There is no systematic relationship between the gravity of their effects and of their proximate causes.

Random chaos and patterned sense making

In the terrain of intellectual work as it is currently divided up, the search for explanations of crime is lost between policy-oriented investigations and therapy-oriented, psychological interpretation. In order to get funding and speak effectively to those in power, policy research is constrained to use conventional categorizations of social problems and to search for background factors that can be modified. Depth psychologists will find it too shallow to base a theory on the behavioral commonalities in and immediately around the situation of criminal action: they would wade into the origins of emotional turbulence.

The justification for the current approach is scientific naturalism, what William James called radical empiricism. We keep inquiry as close to the phenomenon to be explained as data allow in order to document as many differences as we can, in the process specifying the challenge for explanation. We look into mind only so far as we can infer mind from the observable facets of the behavior in question. We accept the inadequacies of what is available as evidence only because the alternatives—advancing explanations on logics that fit into what we already believe, developing the bare explanatory sketches that can be drawn up from the few biographical and social ecological variables that can be documented for all cases—are even less satisfying. Accepting that the actors we try to understand are severely disturbed, we try to grasp the sense of what they do by finding, across cases, repeated methods in the mounting and execution of assaults which make sense of madness, if only for as long as it takes for a burst of gunfire to create lasting destruction.

In criminological research in general, we try to explain momentary eruptions of fateful behavior produced by people who are struggling to make sense of how they fit into their social worlds. The usual explanations are suspect not because they make too little but because they make too much sense to explain biographically rare events. We should keep in mind the irony that while life course and social ecological explanations overflow with false positives, that fault, if it can be overlooked, will enhance the appeal to policy or politically oriented audiences because it authorizes a greater jurisdiction for their powers.

For understanding the people we study, the key appreciation is that a fog had descended somewhere between personal origin, contemporary landscape, and the situational production of self. The valley in which assailants live most often becomes a long depression, filled with acts of self-destruction and an enduring struggle to hide madness under conventional appearances. When we study intimate massacres, we focus on the very few

deeply inhibited, would-be exhibitionists who for a moment insist on forcing everyone to witness an effort to make sense of their lives.

The most common response is to rush away from the horrors of the crime by invoking remedies like gun control, better mental health services, a reduction of media violence, even a liberalization of culture in rural and suburban, white, middle-class communities. Whatever side one takes, what ensues is a discussion that, while impassioned and contentious, is conducted in the key of rationality, which effectively displaces a confrontation with the incomprehensible. Academics have the great advantage that their work is almost always practically irrelevant to the mass public and to people in power. In our irrelevance, we have a unique freedom to make sense of actions generally left to fester as senseless.

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