

School and Related Violence

A BEHAVIOR-ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Overview

- ▶ The role of mental illness and mass violence (Laraine)
- ▶ Asking the right questions
- ▶ The role of firearms
- ▶ **The necessary and sufficient conditions for mass violence**
- ▶ Analogies to terrorism
- ▶ Means of addressing this problem other than pumping billions into mental health and passing tighter gun control legislation (as this is all we hear about)
- ▶ How each of us can become more proactive **regardless** of where we stand on the gun control debate

What Are We Talking About?

According to the FBI, mass murder is defined as four or more murders occurring during a particular event with no cooling-off period between the murders.

A mass murder typically occurs in a single location in which a number of victims are killed by an individual.

How Big is This Problem?

- ▶ Over the past 30 years, public mass shootings have resulted in the murder of 547 people, with 476 other persons injured, according to a March 2013 Congressional Research Service report.
- ▶ Less than one percent of gun murder victims recorded by the FBI in 2010 were killed in incidents with four or more victims.
- ▶ It is nevertheless true that some of the worst acts of violence in U.S. history have taken place in the past decade. Half of the deadliest shootings — incidents at Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook, Binghamton, Fort Hood and the Washington Navy Yard — have taken place since 2007.

Increased Attention to the Problem and Attempts to Understand It

Recent increased attention to the problem has focused on just a few limited potential factors, primarily:

- ▶ Untreated or Undertreated Mental Health Conditions
- ▶ Weapons Availability
- ▶ Use of Violent Video Games

Mental Health Issues

- ▶ According to SAMHSA there is discrimination & stigma associated with mental illness largely stemming from the link between mental illness and violence in the minds of the general public (2003).
- ▶ “61 percent of Americans think that people with schizophrenia are likely to be dangerous to others”

News and Entertainment Media

- ▶ The NMHA reported on several studies that found that characters and stories in the popular media overwhelmingly present people with mental illness as dangerous and having other negative characteristics, a stereotype which is not supported by the evidence. (Shain and Phillips 1991).

Mental Illness and Violence

- ▶ A consensus statement signed by more than three dozen mental health and related professionals published in the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal states that several recent large-scale research projects conclude that only a weak association exists between mental disorders and violence in the community.
- ▶ Serious violence by people with major mental disorders appears concentrated in a small fraction of the total number, and especially in those who use alcohol and other drugs." (Monhan, J. and Arnold, J., 1996)

Mental Illness and Violence

- ▶ A study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* found that patients discharged from psychiatric facilities who did not abuse alcohol and illegal drugs had a rate of violence no different than the general population.
- ▶ Substance abuse raised the rate of violence both among discharged psychiatric patients as well as non-patients.
- ▶ A higher proportion of discharged patients reported having symptoms of substance abuse, and substance abuse was more likely to lead to violence among discharged patients, who were recently released from a hospital setting, than non-patients.

Mental Illness and Violence

- ▶ According to SAMHSA, compared with the other risk factors, the risk of violence presented by mental disorder is modest.
- ▶ “. . . [T]he absolute risk of violence among the mentally ill as a group is still very small and . . . only a small proportion of the violence in our society can be attributed to persons who are mentally ill.” (Mulvey, 1994)

Mental Health Diagnoses

- ▶ It is common for the topic of mental health diagnosis to come up in popular media when a public mass killing occurs.
- ▶ It is natural for people to want a clear explanation for the horrific event that just occurred.
- ▶ If committing such an act “automatically” qualified individuals as mentally ill, what diagnosis would they get?

Intermittent Explosive Disorder?

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Criteria Include:

- Verbal or physical aggression towards other people, animals or property occurring twice weekly on average for one month.

OR

- Three episodes involving physical assault against other people or destruction of property over a 1 year period.

- The aggressive behavior is not premeditated (i.e., is impulsive) and is not committed to achieve some objective such as money, power, intimidation, etc...

This is **not** the typical profile of a mass killer

Conduct Disorder?

Criteria Include:

- A repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated, as manifested by the presence of three (or more) of the following criteria in the past 12 months:
 - aggression to people and animals
 - destruction of property
 - deceitfulness or theft
 - serious violations of rules

Also, **not** the profile of a mass killer

Others?

A few mass shooters have been diagnosed or speculated to be diagnosable with (typically after the fact):

- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar Disorder
- Asperger's Syndrome (now subsumed under in ASD)

None of these include a criterion related to aggression or violence

Mental Health Diagnosis

- ▶ “Research has shown that the vast majority of people who are violent do not suffer from mental illnesses.” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).
- ▶ FBI and DOJ profiles do include behaviors that do not constitute diagnoses by themselves and that are present in the general population at subclinical levels: paranoia, narcissism, delusions, depression, mania

Are Some Mass Murderers Also Legitimately Diagnosed/Diagnosable with a Mental Disorder?

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Yes, but it is not necessary and not sufficient to explain the majority of extreme acts of violence.

If Not The Mentally Ill, Then Who?

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“Predicting the Risk of Future Dangerousness”

Phillipps, Robert T.M. The American Medical Association Journal of Ethics

- ▶ Asserts dangerousness is a more useful concept than illness
- ▶ “Dangerousness is not the result of mental illness, as research has shown...Violence is not a diagnosis nor is it a disease.”
- ▶ “Potential to do harm is not a symptom or a sign of mental illness, rather it must be the central consideration when assessing future dangerousness.”

Dangerousness

- ▶ Phillips points out the many examples of people who kill with full knowledge of the nature and consequences of their actions, adding that their motivation is the benefit derived by the act unencumbered by any impairment of mental capacity.
- ▶ Examples include terrorists, certain gang members, contract killers, etc.
- ▶ One need not be mentally ill to commit horrific acts of violence

FBI Assessment of Dangerousness Relative to School-Based Events

The assessment is based on the "totality of the circumstances" known about the student in four major areas:

- ▶ Prong One: Personal Characteristics
- ▶ Prong Two: Family dynamics
- ▶ Prong Three: School dynamics and the student's role in those dynamics
- ▶ Prong Four: Social dynamics

FBI School Shooter Profile/Risk Factors

Personal Characteristics

- ▶ **Lack of Empathy**
- ▶ Low Tolerance for Frustration
- ▶ **Poor Coping Skills**
- ▶ Lack of Resiliency
- ▶ **Failed Love Relationship**
- ▶ “Injustice Collector”
- ▶ Signs of Depression
- ▶ Narcissistic
- ▶ Alienation and Lack of Trust
- ▶ **Views Others as Less Valuable, or Less Human**
- ▶ Exaggerated Sense of Entitlement/Superiority
- ▶ Exaggerated Need for Attention
- ▶ Rigid and Opinionated
- ▶ Fascination with Violent Entertainment and Sensationalized Violence

FBI School Shooter Profile/Risk Factors

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Family Dynamics

- ▶ Poor Parent-Child Relationship
- ▶ Acceptance of Pathological Behavior
- ▶ **Access to Weapons**
- ▶ Lack of Family Closeness
- ▶ Few or no Limits on Child Conduct
- ▶ No Monitoring of TV and Internet

Asking the right questions...

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- ▶ Most people ask questions along the lines of “What causes these individuals to commit these horrible acts?”
- ▶ Much of the blame is placed on guns, mental illness, violent video games and violent movies and these are offered up by many as the greatest risk factors
- ▶ Given that SO MANY INDIVIDUALS are diagnosed with mental illness, play violent video games, have guns, and watch violent movies, the more important question is...
- ▶ **WHY DON'T THOUSANDS OR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF THESE PEOPLE ATTEMPT MASS KILLINGS?**

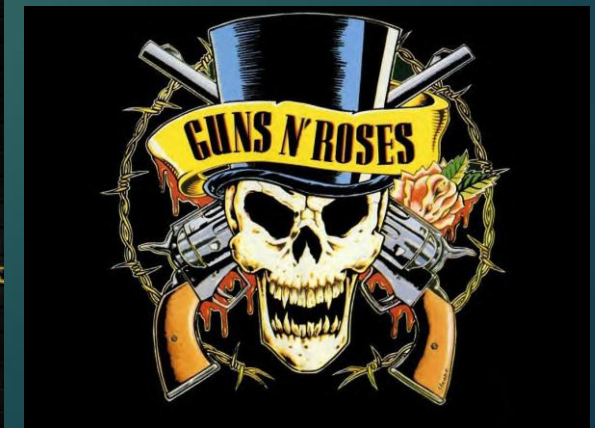
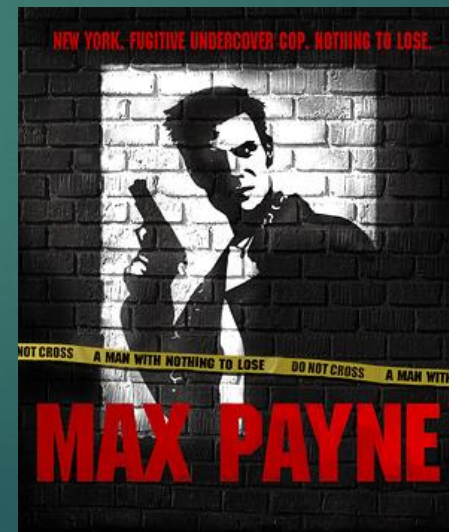
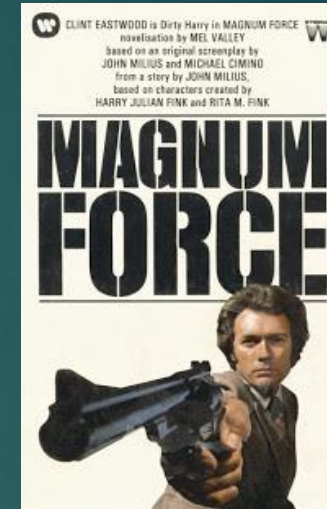
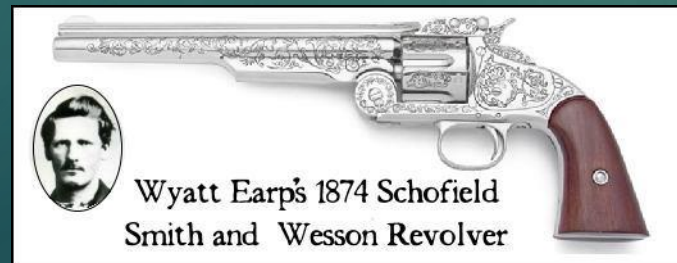
Asking the right questions...

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- ▶ More specifically, what are some **fundamental differences** between those who commit these crimes and those who do not, even though both groups may have been exposed to the same things, i.e., guns, being bullied, violent games/media, mental health problems, etc.
- ▶ The question, “**Why do people do these horrible things?**” will never be as fruitful as questions like...
- ▶ “**Why do law abiding citizens, despite the variables listed above, abide by the law?**” or
- ▶ “**How can we insulate people against the urge to retaliate against others?**”

The role of firearms

Like them or not, firearms are part of our culture...



The role of firearms

- ▶ We have lots of guns in this country
- ▶ Like 310 Million (gunpolicy.org)
- ▶ But how much is 310 million?
- ▶ Assuming an average length of 5 inches per gun (of course rifles are much longer but let's leave it at 5 for now)
- ▶ That equals about 1.5 billion inches of guns
- ▶ That equals about 125 million feet of guns
- ▶ That equals about 23 thousand miles of guns

The role of firearms

- ▶ Guns alone **do not motivate people to commit mass killings**, but they **do** play an important role
- ▶ Guns **amplify** the consequences of a combination of several variables
- ▶ Guns lower the response effort for killing
- ▶ Guns are more effective at killing than many other means
- ▶ Guns require little skill/strength/knowledge (depending on the type of firearm)
- ▶ Guns do not require being physically close to victims
- ▶ Is access to guns, however, the **critical difference** between law-abiding citizens and mass murderers?

The role of firearms

- ▶ If you were inclined to hurt others, would a club work better than a fist?
- ▶ Would a knife work better than a club?
- ▶ Would a revolver work better than a knife?
- ▶ Would a semi-auto pistol with extra clips work better than a revolver?
- ▶ Would an AR-15 with a high capacity mag work better than a semi-auto pistol?
- ▶ Would a pressure cooker bomb work better than an AR-15?
- ▶ Would a drone strike work better than a pressure cooker bomb?

What is the biggest risk factor in mass shootings?

- ▶ Most of what we hear about is availability of **high capacity firearms** and **mental illness** as the largest contributing factors
- ▶ There is however something that is grossly neglected in the analysis of variables that are common to these shootings. All these individuals were males.

Kimmel and Mahler, American Behavioral Scientist **Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence : Random School Shootings, 1982-2001**

- ▶ Most important for our argument is the fact that these studies have all missed gender. They use such broad terminology as “teen violence,” “youth violence,” “gang violence,” “suburban violence,” and “violence in the schools” as though girls are equal participants in this violence. Conspicuously absent is any mention of just who these youth or teens are who have committed the violence. They pay little or no attention to the obvious fact that *all the school shootings were committed by boys*—masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence.
- ▶ The authors believe that “homophobia” per se is not really the motivator (of the bully) but it is an attempt at taking away another young man’s masculinity through the use of name calling/intimidation.

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for mass murder?

- ▶ This is a VERY complex issue as there are all sorts of motivations to murder. Single victim murder is typically very different from mass murder.
- ▶ “Hello my name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die!”
- ▶ There is sanctioned and unsanctioned murder
 - ▶ The Death Penalty
 - ▶ Self-defense/defense of others
 - ▶ Acts of war
- ▶ Some acts of mass murder may involve the same motivators as single victim murder (jealousy, revenge, monetary gain)

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for mass murder?

- ▶ Gang violence (may involve mass victims)
- ▶ Serial killing (multiple victims, but not simultaneous)
- ▶ “Crimes of passion” vs. “Pre-meditation”
- ▶ **Mass killing involving either categories of people or even random individuals with no particular shared characteristics**
- ▶ We already know that access to guns plays an important role, but this access alone is entirely insufficient

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for mass murder?

- ▶ What are some different kinds of mass murder?
- ▶ Genocide (Auschwitz, Rwanda, Christians in the middle east)
- ▶ Acts of War (Hiroshima)
- ▶ Acts of Terrorism (Oklahoma city, 911, Boston Marathon)
- ▶ School/workplace shootings
- ▶ All of these share some similarities, but also important differences
- ▶ For now let's focus on school/workplace shootings

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for mass murder?

- ▶ Let's focus on **3 critical variables** that may give rise to school/workplace violence
- ▶ **Motivation (MOs)**
- ▶ **Neutralized Aversives (may simply be diminished, or completely neutral)**
- ▶ **Lack of Empathy (related to neutralized aversives) We could say that the suffering of others is neutral to us, in extreme cases the suffering of others may even constitute an aberrant reinforcer**
- ▶ **Any form** of murder will have these components, but the number and degree of the MO's may be different as well as the neutralized aversives. Furthermore, the scope and reason for the lack of empathy may differ. The variations in these components will be different for different types of killing.
- ▶ For example...

The “Hitman”

- ▶ **Motivator?** Money
- ▶ **Neutralized aversives?** Risk of prison/death penalty. Here the aversive is minimized, but the hitman DOES NOT want to be caught or killed and DOES NOT want notoriety
- ▶ **Lack of empathy?** The lack of empathy (or diminished empathy) is only for the one victim

Gang-related violence

- ▶ **Motivators?** Revenge, Financial gain, Notoriety among other gangs.
- ▶ **Neutralized aversives?** Risk of prison, loss of life during a shootout. Like the Hitman, the gang member DOES NOT want to die and DOES NOT want to be arrested, but this fear is not so great as to stop the act from happening.
- ▶ **Lack of empathy?** Unlike the Hitman, the gang member has a selective lack of empathy for an **entire group of people** (rival gang members) yet gang members still have concern and empathy for the members of their own gang, family members, etc.

Terrorism

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- ▶ **Motivators?** In her insightful book “What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat” Louise Richardson talks about the 3 Rs of Terrorism
 - ▶ Revenge (you killed our people we will kill yours)
 - ▶ Renown (to acquire glory, attention, etc.)
 - ▶ Reaction (force their adversary into a reaction, verbally or through other actions like military action, entering into discussions, withdrawing from a region, etc.)
- ▶ **Neutralized aversives?** No fear of being caught, no fear of being killed, no fear of losing anything. (not true for all terrorists)
- ▶ **Lack of empathy?** Large-scale selective. They lack empathy for an entire population of individuals (all Americans deserve to die, all Christians, all Sunnis, all Shias)

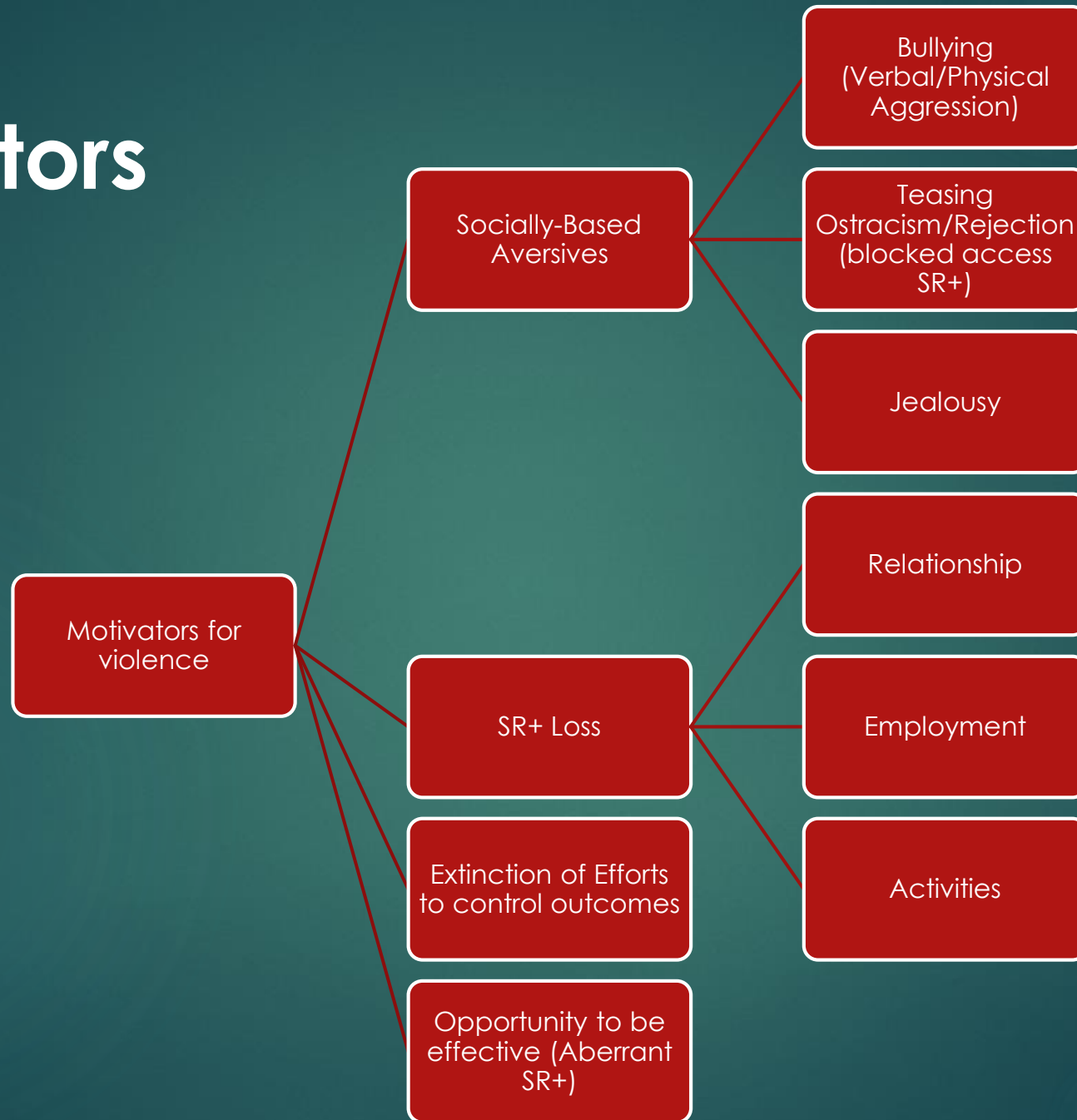
School/workplace shooters

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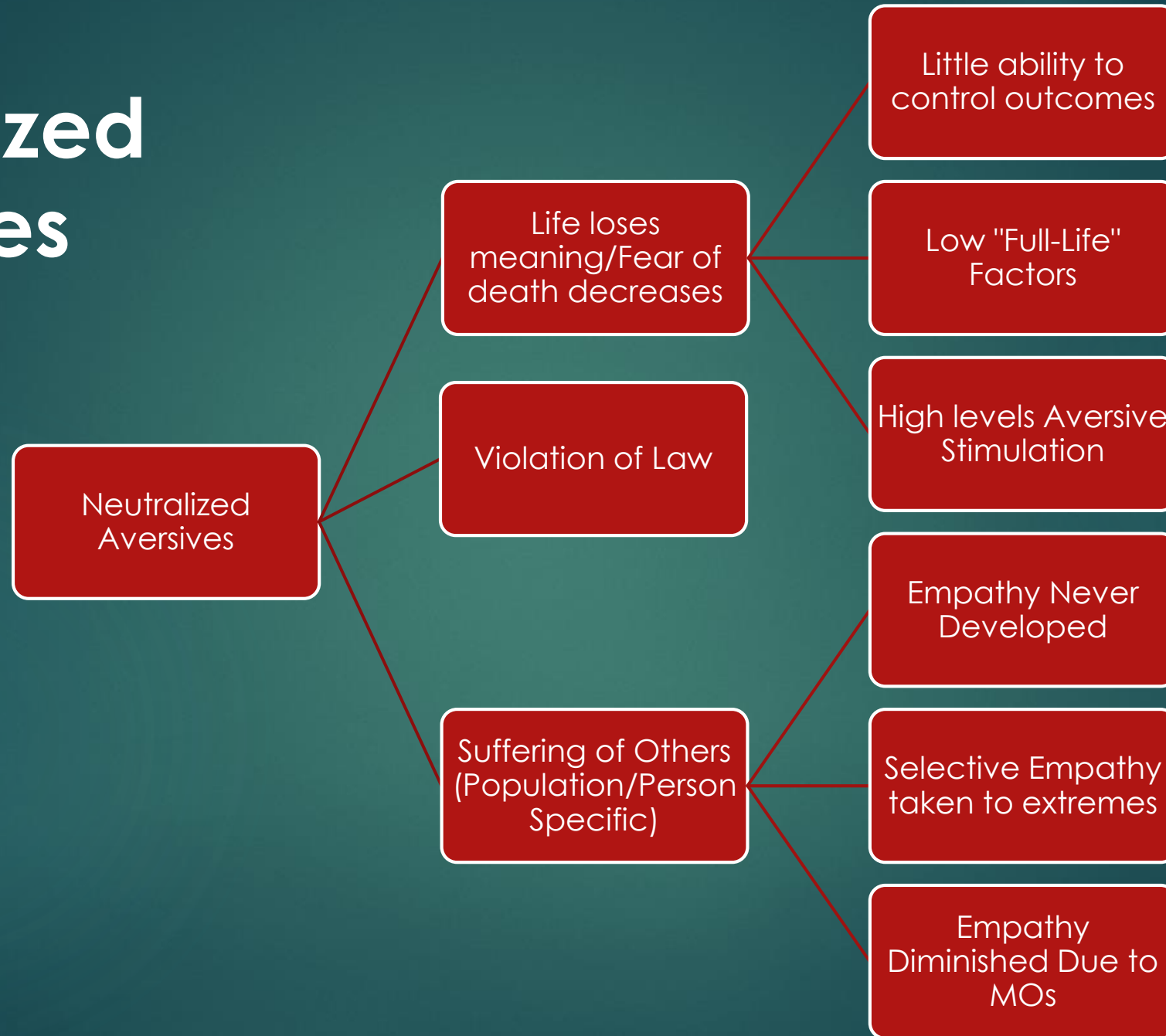
- ▶ Perhaps more similar to terrorists than any other “murder” group
- ▶ **Motivators?** Highly varied; being bullied, being excluded by a group, jealousy, being fired from a job, being rejected by love interests, perhaps even revenge and renown.
- ▶ **Neutralized aversives?** Like many terrorists, most of these individuals do not fear prison nor loss of life as many of these individuals *plan to commit suicide*. Like the terrorist, suicide is NOT the primary goal. **Unlike the suicide bomber**, most of these individuals do not need to kill themselves to accomplish their primary goal. Suicide is instead a secondary goal that is met after the primary goal has been accomplished.
- ▶ **Lack of empathy?** Like the terrorist, the school/workplace shooter has a lack of empathy for groups of people, although typically a much smaller group than the terrorist (all students at a school, all “Jocks” within the school, all employees at a work place).

Flowcharts Of Violence

Motivators



Neutralized Aversives

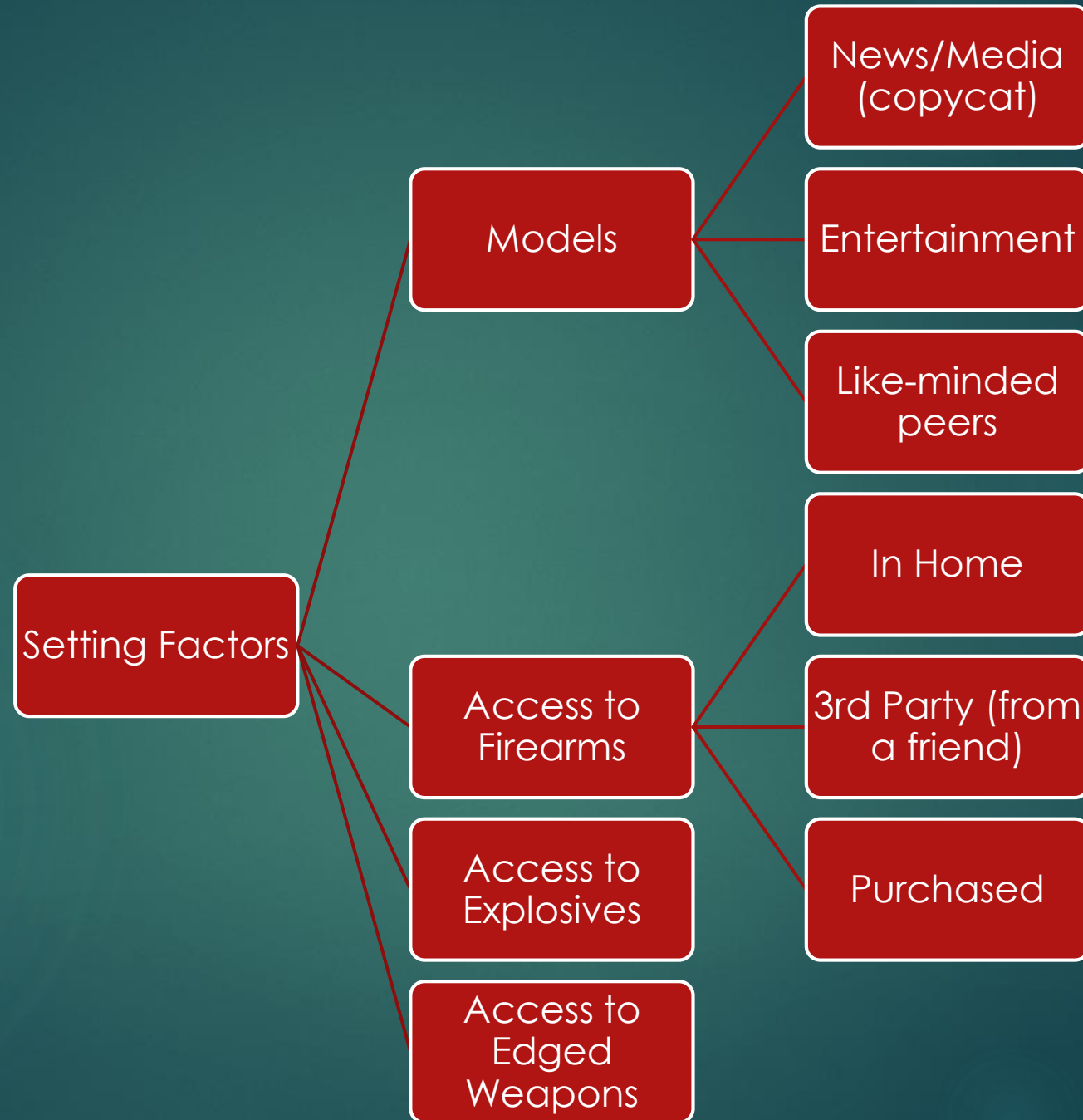


Selective empathy

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Setting Factors



These don't answer the "Why did this happen" questions. These MAY answer the "why this form?" and "why is the incident so severe" questions

Why is gun control not a **complete** solution?

- ▶ It has been argued that smaller clip sizes and assault rifles bans would mean fewer casualties
- ▶ It may very well mean fewer casualties, but this won't necessarily translate into fewer **incidents**
- ▶ It has been argued that making it harder to get guns legally would also address the problem
- ▶ It may help, but what about **illegal acquisition**? Remember, 300 million guns.
- ▶ Guns are BIG BUSINESS, and when money is thrown into the mix EVERYTHING CHANGES. Many gun manufacturers contribute to the NRA who lobbies against gun control bills
- ▶ This can make legislation much more difficult
- ▶ It's not that we shouldn't attempt these things, but we also **shouldn't be misled that these steps will address root causes**

In response to Newtown, what new gun laws were passed, nation-wide?

- ▶ Dr. Joe Wyatt and his colleagues gave a great presentation at the 2014 ABAI conference on school shooters
- ▶ About 1,500 new state gun bills were introduced in the year following Newtown.
- ▶ Of these 1500 bills, 109 became law.
- ▶ Of these 109 new laws:
 - ▶ 39 **tightened** restrictions on gun access
 - ▶ 70 **loosened** restrictions on gun access

Source: Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

U.S. vs. Australia, U.K. & France

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- ▶ Fact: Per capita, the U.S. has approximately 30 times more gun deaths than the U.K., Australia, France.
- ▶ Mental health problems? No differences
- ▶ Violent media? No differences
- ▶ Gangs? No differences
- ▶ Gun access? Large differences.

Legislative action

- ▶ Remember, these numbers do not reflect the **type of murder** being committed. MOST murders are NOT mass shootings. They are typically between two people.
- ▶ Even with the best legislation and the most restrictive laws passed we still have the problem of the sheer number of firearms in the US
- ▶ Does it mean we shouldn't try to limit gun access any way can?
- ▶ No, we should, but it still does not address the **root causes** of the problems of mass shooting and it is quite possible that even with the best restrictions mass shooting will turn into mass killing via other methods

Elliot Rodger

He said his next phase would be head to the Alpha Phi Sorority, to kill women there. Once he arrived there, he pounded on the door but was denied entrance; he shot three women outside, two fatally. From there, he said, he planned to drive the streets "splattering as many enemies as I can with my SUV" and shooting at passers-by.

Alex Hribal

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- ▶ Used kitchen knives
- ▶ No one was killed but many were seriously injured
- ▶ No firearms involved
- ▶ Yes, it would have been far worse with firearms but the fundamental problem still exists
- ▶ The question still remains: **Would the individuals who committed school shootings/workplace shootings have done NOTHING AT ALL if there were no firearms available?** This is the implied assumption.
- ▶ Furthermore, most mass terrorist attacks do not involve guns
- ▶ Yes terrorists are large and organized and single shooters are not, but the single shooter may still be able to improvise other attacks

What else can we do? Is limiting firearms access the only thing?

- ▶ Whether you are for tighter control or against it, whether laws are passed or not, these events will happen again given the sheer number of guns in circulation
- ▶ The 300 million does not necessarily include “black market” weapons
- ▶ Can't we do anything about the fundamental problems?
- ▶ I think we can, at least on a personal level and perhaps on a greater scale

The role of empathy

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- ▶ We can start by teaching our own children empathy for others and by showing empathy for others, even those whose actions we disapprove of
- ▶ It is **natural** (not mention very easy) to hate and de-value the lives of people who have done bad things to us, but it isn't **necessary**
- ▶ Some people, whose family members have been murdered are UPSET when the perpetrator of the crime does NOT get the death penalty
- ▶ Others understand that the death of the perpetrator will not bring back their loved one

The role of empathy

- ▶ We can teach our children by showing empathy for all people and not just those in our own families/races/communities, etc.
- ▶ Do you hate the person with disabilities who just bit you and broke your glasses? Or do you try to understand, forgive and help that person?
- ▶ What if the person had no disability?
- ▶ It's easy to have empathy for people who get picked on, but what about the bully? Is the bully truly a happy person? Are people who are real A-holes happy people?
- ▶ Is it easier to hate these people or to try to understand these people?

The role of empathy

- ▶ Can we teach our children to be sensitive to the suffering of others?
- ▶ Can we prompt and reinforce “helping” behavior?
- ▶ Can we teach our children to forgive?
- ▶ Are we modeling empathetic, helpful behavior?
- ▶ Are we teaching our children selective empathy without realizing it?
- ▶ Can we arrange opportunities for our children to care for animals and people to see the benefits of helping?
- ▶ Empathy is a complex sort of thing but, perhaps, at it’s root is that **the suffering of others is aversive** to you and **seeing others made happier is a reinforcer**.

Does our culture send dual messages about murder?

- ▶ Whether you're for or against it, as long as the death penalty exists, we are saying, as a country, the lives of certain people are unimportant, that is, "They were all bad"
- ▶ This is an example of selective empathy
- ▶ You did bad things. You don't deserve to live. It is sanctioned murder
- ▶ "Collateral Damage"
- ▶ Failure to recall defective cars because it's cheaper to settle wrongful death lawsuits

What about the motivation for mass shootings and neutralized aversives?

- ▶ What do we teach our children about being bullied?
- ▶ Being excluded from peer groups?
- ▶ Being rejected by love interests?
- ▶ Having their masculinity assaulted?

Teach coping skills!

- ▶ What to do when teased
- ▶ What to do when excluded
- ▶ What to do when being ignored, rejected
- ▶ What to do when being treated badly in any way by a peer or teacher
- ▶ For older children, teaching assertive behavior as opposed to aggressive behavior
- ▶ What are we teaching other children who do not bully, but witness bullying and laugh about it?

Regarding media....

- ▶ Video games did not invent violence, they reflect it
- ▶ Movies did not invent violence, they reflect it
- ▶ Because of the media (including CNN), YES, children are exposed to images and ideas of violence FAR MORE than they would most likely ever experience them in real life.
- ▶ It's not that we should ban these things altogether, but, at some point in children's development, we must teach them how to react to what they see and hear.

What about neutralized aversives?

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- ▶ John Oliver, the comedian said recently...
- ▶ “One of the greatest deterrents to people murdering other people...”
- ▶ “IS THE LAW AGAINST MURDERING”
- ▶ Clearly, this law doesn’t bother **everyone**, but there is most certainly a segment of the population that the law keeps in check
- ▶ What about the loss of one’s own life becoming non-aversive or less aversive?
- ▶ What is the role of people feeling that “they have nothing to live for?”

What about neutralized aversives?

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- ▶ Most of the school/workplace shooters killed themselves afterwards or were willing to die to accomplish their goals
- ▶ What causes people to value and/or devalue their lives?

De-valuing one's life

- ▶ Certainly, constant exposure to aversives, pain, bullying, physical and psychological abuse, could cause anyone to value their lives less
- ▶ Loss of potent reinforcers
- ▶ Certainly, these things might cause any of us to value our lives less.
- ▶ People who value their own lives less are at risk for all sorts of problems
- ▶ What kinds of things make people value their lives more?

Lives worth living: What matters?

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- ▶ Love
- ▶ Sex (not necessarily in this order)
- ▶ Recognition (fame)
- ▶ Money
- ▶ Health
- ▶ Family
- ▶ Friends
- ▶ Religion
- ▶ Pets

Lives worth living: What matters?

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- ▶ Work
- ▶ Recreation
- ▶ The ability to be creative
- ▶ Tangible reinforcers (stuff)
- ▶ Food
- ▶ Sports
- ▶ Entertainment
- ▶ Acquiring new skills (competence in various arenas)
- ▶ The ability to (appropriately) affect things and people (beneficial control of others).
- ▶ Plans for the future

Summary

- ▶ Mass shootings are VERY complex problems that will not be solved by acts of congress or by pumping more money into mental health programs
- ▶ We most likely will never stop these events entirely, like terrorism we can only hope to manage them more effectively
- ▶ **We can begin** by taking a careful look at teaching coping skills to offset the motivators for exacting revenge
- ▶ **We can begin** by modeling non-selective empathy, and looking for opportunities to foster empathy in children
- ▶ **We can begin** by looking at “meaningful life” variables for children to see how they stack up in terms of things to live for. People with a great deal to lose tend fear death and/or incarceration (it’s healthy to fear some things)

Lives worth living: What matters?

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- ▶ For those people who do mass killings, how many items on this list do you believe they could have checked off?
- ▶ If you don't value your own life, you MIGHT not value anyone else's either
- ▶ This is at the heart of empathy, my life is important to me and those that I love, so I can see how your life is important to you and those who love you
- ▶ OR My life is worthless and so is yours.

A famous quote...

- ▶ "Perceive the way of nature and no force of man can harm you.
- ▶ Do not meet a wave head on: avoid it.
- ▶ You do not have to stop force: it is easier to redirect it.
- ▶ Learn more ways to preserve rather than destroy.
- ▶ Avoid rather than check.
- ▶ Check rather than hurt.
- ▶ Hurt rather than maim.
- ▶ Maim rather than kill. For all life is precious nor can any be replaced."

Master Kan, Kung Fu, The television series.