

Expanding the Sample: Five School Shooters

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Introduction

My book, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*, categorized ten rampage school shooters into three types. These types are psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized. Of the ten shooters, two were classified as psychopathic, five as psychotic, and three as traumatized. The shooters were then compared and contrasted both within and across the three types. Similarities and differences were noted and hypotheses presented in an effort to shed light on the dynamics of school shooters. This article seeks to continue the same line of research by exploring five other school shooters and comparing them to the ten presented in my book.

The five shooters discussed in this article are more difficult to study because less is known about them. In several cases, there are reasons to think they may belong to more than one category of school shooters. Though the evidence is sometimes contradictory or unclear, my goal is to sift through the material to arrive at the strongest conclusion given the available information. These are, however, tentative conclusions.

The five shooters are Robert Poulin, Brenda Spencer, Wayne Lo, Luke Woodham, and Asa Coon. For each of these, facts of the case will be presented, followed by a discussion and an attempt to place them within the typology. When appropriate, a particular shooter will be compared with another shooter in order to highlight similarities and differences. Finally, these five shooters will be added to the typology presented in my book, along with observations of where they do and do not fit with my original findings.

Robert Poulin

On October 27, 1975, Robert Poulin committed a rampage school shooting at St. Pius X High School in Ottawa, Canada. He shot 7 people, killing one of them, and then killed himself. Prior to the shooting at the school, Robert had killed a girl in his home (after raping her). Robert's rampage attack was documented in a book called *The Rape of a Normal Mind* by Chris Cobb and Bob Avery.¹ Because the attack occurred over 30 years ago and the book is hard to find, Poulin's story is not well-known. Thus, basic details will be presented here (all the facts are drawn from Cobb and Avery).

Background Information

At the time of the attack, Robert Poulin was 18 years old. His father was a former pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force who had left the military and become a school teacher. Robert's mother was a nurse who also volunteered as a lunchroom supervisor at an elementary school. Robert had three sisters – two older (one married and out of the home, and the other age 21) and one younger (age 7).

Several biological factors are of interest. First, Robert was born with a “pigeon-chest” (pectus carinatum), a deformity that results in the chest being convex. He also had poor vision, which interfered with his desire to become a pilot. In addition, he reportedly always looked young for his age, was somewhat overweight, and reached puberty later than most kids.²

Robert did not have a childhood history of violence or aggression. He was described as someone who “was never hostile and not the kind of person who held a grudge.”³ His parents commented that Robert never seemed to be upset by much,

maintaining an outward appearance of tranquility.⁴ He went to church regularly, and had jobs delivering newspapers and working in a pizza shop. His parents described him as a very conscientious paperboy who at one time had two routes and never missed a day.⁵

Robert's social skills were not good. He was shy and rather awkward in social situations, especially with girls. As a child, he had always had a lot of friends at his birthday parties, but as a teenager he had fewer friendships. He was not a loner, however.

Prior to the attack, Robert's most noteworthy behavior was his obsession with sex and pornography. He maintained an index of several pornographic magazines. Besides indexing the publications, Robert rated photographs and advertisements, keeping a detailed record of his ratings. The extent of his records was remarkable: "Police found eleven looseleaf binder pages containing nearly 1,000 separate entries on pictures and ads."⁶

Robert also had a scrapbook of photographs of nude men and women, and a collection of hardcore pornography books, some of which focused on bondage and included photographs of women handcuffed to bedposts. His collection of pornography included 250 books and magazines.⁷ This is of interest because of what Robert did to a girl on the day of his attack. In fact, the police found four pairs of handcuffs in Robert's bedroom. Other sexual items in his room included a box of women's clothing (bras, panties, negligees), an inflatable sex doll, Robert's writing about his disappointment with the sex doll, a condom-type vibrator device, and a list of 18 names of girls. Some of these girls had received obscene telephone calls that stopped after Robert's death on the day of his rampage.⁸

It also appears that Robert engaged in criminal sexual behavior. There had been several complaints of indecent assaults and attempted rapes along paths and the grounds of an apartment building near Robert's home. The descriptions of the assailant fit Robert. Some women reported that the assailant wore nothing but a balaclava (a scarf-like item used to cover the head and lower portion of the face). Robert had written in his diary about wearing a balaclava if and when he raped someone.⁹

Apart from pornography, Robert's primary hobby was wargaming. He played a variety of games related to war, and had friends with whom he played wargames over the telephone. Robert's career goal was to join the military. He suffered a devastating blow when, after being given indications that he had been accepted for officer training, he was rejected due to being "immature."¹⁰ At some point, it was discovered that Robert had lied on his application, claiming that he played several team sports (he did not play sports at all). Following his rejection for officer training, Robert joined the Cameron Highlanders militia where he received training in a range of military skills.

In the militia, Robert struck people as timid at first, because he "sat alone in the camp lunch room staring into space, and the only time he talked to anyone was when they talked to him."¹¹ He did adjust, though, and became more engaged with his fellow soldiers over time. He still seemed low-key, however. If other soldiers joked around, Robert might smile, but he did not laugh. When asked about his family, Robert avoided say-

ing much and was quick to change the subject. In addition to his militia training, Robert received some unauthorized commando training which he reportedly enjoyed.

Robert had been depressed and intermittently suicidal for some time before his rampage. He wrote a diary entry on April 7, 1975 that documented his suicidal thoughts. At the time, he explained his reason for not killing himself: "I don't want to die before I have had the pleasure of fucking some girl."¹² In the same entry, he recorded his discovery of a sex doll that would allow him to simulate having intercourse. He wrote, "Now I no longer think that I will have to rape a girl, and am unsure as to whether or not I will still commit suicide."¹³

The same diary entry mentioned his thoughts about two other illegal acts beside rape. He noted, "I have a half hatched idea about using the gun to rob people at night."¹⁴ It is not known that he ever followed through on this idea. More disturbing, however, were his thoughts about making his family suffer. The day he committed suicide would also be the day that he burned down his home. He gave particular attention to how to make the loss as significant as possible: "I was going to make sure, though, that I burned the place down soon after payday so that they would lose the largest possible amount of money. I was also planning on having all my earthly possessions with me so that they wouldn't gain one red cent from me."¹⁵ His diary gave no hint as to why he wanted to make his family suffer.

Robert did not record any specific reason for wanting to die. He wrote of death as something positive, commenting that, "death is the true bliss."¹⁶ His suicidal feelings, however, may have been a result of his severe shyness. As early as September, 1972 (over three years before his rampage), Robert wrote, "There are some girls at school that I would love to be good friends with but I know that I am still too shy to go up and talk to any of them. I wish I could overcome this fear of women."¹⁷

Perhaps Robert overcame his fear of women by objectifying them as sexual objects and then trying to force himself on them. On the day of the attack, before he shot anyone at school, Robert raped and killed a girl. The girl was Kim Rabot, someone Robert reportedly had had a crush on two years earlier. She had been to his home once in 10th grade. It is not known how Robert got Kim into the house on October 27, 1975, but once inside she had been handcuffed to the bed, sexually assaulted, and then stabbed to death.

After killing Kim, Robert did what he said he would do in his diary: he set the house on fire. Then he went to school, shot students, and killed himself.

Making Sense of Robert

Using my typology of school shooters as a starting point, what was wrong with Robert? There is no indication that he had any hallucinations or delusions. Therefore, he does not appear to have been psychotic. Neither is there any indication that he was physically or sexually abused. Therefore, he does not appear to have been traumatized. The third type of school shooter is the psychopath. Is there any evidence that Robert was psychopathic?

Robert was not the charming, charismatic kind of psychopath. He was not skilled in making a good impression. There is no clear evidence that he was grandiose, though a comment he wrote in a book is worth noting: “You are all sinners – be sorry.”¹⁸ Did he come to believe that he was superior to others and look down on those he viewed as sinners?

Regardless of whether or not he was narcissistic or grandiose, he clearly met his own needs at the expense of others. His preoccupation with sexually assaulting and/or raping girls indicates a profound lack of empathy. Also, tricking a girl he knew into coming into his home and then handcuffing her, raping her, and stabbing her 14 times certainly seems sadistic. Similarly, his idea to rob people at gunpoint suggests that he wanted to experience a sense of power over others – not just sexually as in rape, but also by making them fear him because he had a gun.

Robert also had the ability to maintain his composure under tremendous stress. His bedroom was in the basement, being separated only by a curtain from the rest of the cellar. On the morning of the attack, while Kim Rabot was unconscious or dead, Mrs. Poulin came down to the basement and spoke to Robert. She asked if she could talk to him, and he said, “yeah, but don’t come in.”¹⁹ She did not open the curtain to Robert’s room, but told him she had scheduled an eye appointment for him. About an hour later, Robert came upstairs and asked his mother for a peanut butter sandwich. He sat down and watched a quiz show as he ate his sandwich. His mother noticed nothing unusual about him during this entire time.

If Robert had feelings of guilt or remorse, he would have been overcome by emotion for what he had done to Kim. The casualness of his behavior after having raped a girl he knew, and then stabbed her to death, suggests a remarkable lack of empathy as well as a lack of remorse. When compared to non-psychopathic school shooters, the difference is striking. Kip Kinkel was devastated and distraught after killing his parents, and was in a state of extreme distress after shooting people at school. Michael Carneal shot people at school, then dropped his gun and yelled for someone to kill him. Andrew Wurst was agitated and babbling nonsense when he was apprehended after shooting people at a school dinner-dance.

Robert, however, had not only committed murder, but he knew the victim and she had been to his home previously. In addition, he did not shoot her from a distance, which can lessen the impact of killing someone, but stabbed her 14 times. To be unemotional following a brutal killing that was up close and personal suggests a profound lack of feeling.

Robert Poulin and Eric Harris

It is often interesting to compare cases of school shooters, looking at both similarities and differences. The cases of Robert Poulin and Eric Harris, though different in many ways, share a number of striking parallels. The significance of these parallels may not always be clear, but by noting them when they occur, we may eventually accumulate sufficient data to be able to shed further light on the phenomenon of rampage school

shootings.

Both Robert and Eric had bedrooms in the basements of their homes. This is a coincidence. Beyond the coincidence of the location of their bedrooms, however, is the issue that both boys seemed to have an unusual amount of privacy in their rooms, even when there were reasons for concerns about their behavior. They each accumulated things in their bedrooms that would later shock and horrify their parents.

Both boys had fathers who were retired air force pilots who had started second careers. Both boys had military aspirations. Both had their military aspirations thwarted to some extent. Eric was rejected by the Marines, though he reportedly never found this out (he may have suspected it would happen, however). Robert was rejected for officer training, and could not pursue a career as a pilot due to his poor eyesight. Both boys had lied on their military applications. Eric lied that he was not on any medication, and Robert lied that he played team sports. Both boys were preoccupied with playing fantasy wargames (board games for Robert and videogames for Eric), and both played the games with friends over the telephone.

Both boys were born with chest deformities. Eric’s was pectus excavatum, which gave him a concave chest. Robert’s was pectus carinatum, which gave him a convex chest. For boys in military families who had military aspirations of their own, these deformities could have had a significant impact on their identities.

Both boys fantasized about raping girls they knew. Eric liked to think about tricking girls into his bedroom, ripping their clothes off, and raping them. The difference is that Robert acted on his fantasies and Eric did not. Both boys were interested in weapons and violence, though Eric was more preoccupied in this area than Robert. Eric loved playing with fire and once set a fire that required a response from the fire department. Robert tried to burn his house down on the day of the attack. Both boys went out at night and committed illegal acts. Robert tried to sexually assault and rape women, and Eric vandalized neighbors’ homes and set off bombs. Both were desperate to have sex before they killed themselves, and both thought that having sex might keep them from needing to kill themselves and/or others. Eric wrote that maybe “getting laid” would be enough so that he wouldn’t have to go on a rampage.

Both boys were good students and enjoyed science fiction. Their interest in wargames and science fiction might be related to a preoccupation with fantasy. Both were capable of detailed work. Eric spent hours programming new levels to video games. Robert spent hours building hundreds of model planes²⁰ and keeping detailed records of his pornography ratings.

Both boys were 18 years old when they committed their rampages. Eric complained about being small, and Robert reportedly had always been developmentally behind his peers.

Robert and Eric differed in that Eric was much more socially successful than Robert. He had more friends and was able to ask girls out and have dates. Also, Eric engaged in illegal behavior with friends, and committed his rampage attack with a peer. Robert conducted his illegal behavior and rampage alone.

Brenda Spencer

In 1979, 16-year-old Brenda Spencer committed a sniper attack from her home in San Diego, shooting people at the elementary school across the street. Calling this attack a rampage school shooting may be stretching the definition of the phenomenon. Unlike the other shooters under discussion, Brenda was not a student at the school she assaulted. She had, however, been a student there five years previously. Though some definitions of school shootings include attacks by both current and former students, “former students” generally refers to students who have been expelled or drop out and shortly thereafter commit an attack. Although Brenda was a former student of the school she assaulted, she had not been a recent student at the school. It is not clear that she picked the school as the site of her attack because it had been her school, or if she simply chose it as a target of convenience because it was across the street from her home.

Regardless of why she chose the school, on January 29, 1979, Brenda killed the principal and a janitor, and wounded 8 children and a police officer (unless otherwise specified, the facts presented in this section are from Dr. Jonathan Fast’s book, *Ceremonial Violence: A Psychological Explanation of School Shootings*²¹).

Brenda was the youngest of three children, with a brother who was approximately six years older and a sister approximately four years older. In 1972, when Brenda was nine, her mother sought to get a divorce and petitioned to keep her children. After the children met with the judge privately, custody was awarded to the father. The reason for this is unknown. By 1976, Brenda’s brother and sister had moved out of the home, leaving Brenda alone with her father. Mr. Spencer was seen as a good father. There are apparently no reports of alcoholism, physical abuse, or any kind of mistreatment of Brenda.

For Christmas, 1978, he gave Brenda a .22 caliber semiautomatic rifle with a telescopic sight, along with 500 rounds of ammunition. A few weeks later she was talking to her friends about having plans to turn her garage into a fortress. She also talked about an upcoming event that would be “big” and “will be on television and everything.”²² On January 29, she committed her attack on the elementary school.

Although there are multiple factors to consider in this case, Brenda seems to belong in the psychopathic category. As with other shooters in this category (Drew Golden and Eric Harris), Brenda had a sadistic streak. According to Dr. Fast, Brenda’s peers “recall her chasing neighborhood strays with a can of lighter fluid, with the intention of soaking their tails and setting them afire.”²³

Another similarity she shared with Eric Harris and Drew Golden is an unusual interest in firearms and killing. As one peer said, “We were nice to her because we were afraid of her ... I didn’t like her because she always talked about killing things.”²⁴ She reportedly loved guns and was an excellent shot. At age eleven, she liked to shoot birds with her BB gun. According to a friend, Brenda “dreamed of making her living as a sniper.”²⁵

Brenda also had a fascination for knives and reportedly always carried a knife with her. A friend of hers recalled, “She loved knives.”²⁶ Brenda had also been arrested twice prior to the shooting – once for shooting out the windows at the elementary school, and another time for shoplifting ammunition. She demonstrated other antisocial behavior in being truant so often that she was suspended.

Brenda also demonstrated a remarkable nonchalance during the attack. There was no indication of rage, anguish, or distress of any kind. Rather, the attack seemed to strike her as an entertaining activity. A quick-thinking reporter identified the Spencer home as one that was across the street from the school. Not knowing that someone in the Spencer home was doing the shooting, he called the house in hopes of finding a witness who could describe the scene that was unfolding. Brenda answered the telephone and talked to the reporter in a bantering manner, accompanied by giggles. She said, “I just started shooting. That’s it. I just did it for the fun of it.”²⁷ The reporter described her as calm and matter-of-fact. When told that she may have killed three or four people, she said, “Is that all?...I saw lots of feathers fly.”²⁸ Just before hanging up, Brenda said, “I have to go now. I shot a pig [police officer], I think, and I want to shoot more.”²⁹

As noted in the section on Robert Poulin, other rampage shooters experienced significant distress during and after their attacks. Most of them were suicidal, and most were full of rage. There was no indication of either depression or rage in Brenda. Nor was there any indication of distress regarding what she had done. In fact, just the opposite. After telling the reporter she had shot a police officer, she said she wanted to shoot more. Thus, even the interruption by the reporter during the attack did not faze her or have any deterrent effect. This lack of emotion is consistent with psychopathic behavior. Psychopaths have significant deficits in their ability to feel anxiety, fear, guilt, and other emotions. They also do not recognize other people as beings like themselves, and therefore can victimize them and feel nothing.

It is also noteworthy that Brenda specifically wanted to kill police. She reportedly had derived particular enjoyment when seeing cops shot in television shows. She also had talked to her friends about wanting to kill cops.³⁰ Eric Harris wrote that he hated cops and there are passages in his writings about killing cops. Psychopaths are people who do not recognize the validity of laws; thus, it is not surprising that they would target the people who represent “the law.”

Psychopaths typically engage in a variety of illegal behaviors, and this was true of Brenda. She told her peers that she was often high on drugs, but the accuracy of this is unknown. As mentioned earlier, she had been suspended from school for excessive truancy. She bragged about her skill as a shoplifter, and was once arrested for stealing ammunition. She was also arrested for shooting out windows at the elementary school.

Though Brenda exhibited traits and behaviors suggestive of a psychopathic school shooter, there are other factors to consider. First, she reportedly hit her head in a fall from her bicycle at age 14. Following the attack, she was found to have abnormal

brain waves and it was suggested that she might be epileptic. Though a traumatic brain injury can have a dramatic impact on someone's functioning, there is no apparent evidence that Brenda's head injury was significant, nor that there was any change in her functioning at all. In fact, she liked guns and killing at least as early as age 11. Her later misuse of firearms is consistent with the portrait of her as a girl prior to the fall from her bike.

Another point is that psychopaths can have highly unusual brain waves; this has been noted by Dr. Robert Hare, one of the world authorities on psychopaths.³¹ Thus, Brenda's abnormal brain waves might have been due to her psychopathy, not the head injury. Finally, even if she did have epilepsy or brain damage of some kind, this would not explain her attack. Without more substantive evidence, the attack cannot be attributed to an injury she endured in a fall from her bicycle.

The second factor to consider is substance abuse. At her first parole hearing, 14 years after the attack, Brenda claimed she had been high at the time of the shooting. She said that she had been experiencing hallucinations of commandos and was paranoid that she was under attack. Therefore, she began shooting.

This testimony is contradicted by two sources. First, her own conversation with the reporter during the attack is completely at odds with what she claimed 14 years later. She clearly stated that she was shooting people just for fun. There was no mention of thinking she was under attack by commandos. The second contradiction to her claim of drug-induced hallucinations was that after her arrest she was tested for substances, and the tests were negative. Thus, her claim of drug-induced behavior does not stand up.

Brenda made other statements at this hearing that are clearly inaccurate, including stating that the results of her drug tests had been falsified (by a conspiracy involving the police, the prosecuting attorney, and her defense attorney), and that the children she shot had actually been shot by the police. The impression she gave is that she was willing to say anything to avoid accepting responsibility for her actions. As a result, her parole was denied.

Another possible factor to consider is child abuse. If Brenda were an abused child, perhaps she would belong in the traumatized category of school shooter. At her second parole hearing, 22 years after the attack, Brenda claimed that her father committed incest with her and beat her with his hands.³² Her statements at this hearing need to be carefully considered. Though it is possible that she kept the incest a secret for 22 years, it is also possible that having failed to obtain parole at her previous hearing, she was willing to say anything she thought would help get her out of jail. The claim that she was traumatized is questionable.

As noted above, though Brenda's mother petitioned for custody of her children, custody was given to the father. This was done after the judge met with the children. This suggests that the children gave the judge compelling testimony that they wanted to live with their father. Though we don't know what was said, the outcome suggests that the children preferred their

father. There was no indication at that point that he mistreated the children. Nor is there any evidence that any abuse occurred after Brenda moved in with her father. This does not mean that there was no abuse, only that there is no corroboration of Brenda's allegation of incest.

In fact, other statements Brenda made during the second parole hearing raise further questions about her testimony. She said that she thought her father gave her a gun as a present because he wanted her to kill herself. She also said, "I had failed in every other suicide attempt. I thought if I shot at the cops, they would shoot me."³³ Several points can be made about these statements.

First, Brenda had loved guns and shooting for years. When her father gave her a gun for Christmas, he may have simply been giving her a gift he knew she would enjoy. Second, I have found no reference to any suicide attempts by Brenda, and as noted above, there is no indication that she was suicidal at the time of the shooting. In fact, she was having a good time and made no effort to kill herself. Finally, if she had wanted to be shot by police, she could have committed the shooting in public (as other shooters have done), rather than engaging in a sniper attack from the safety of her home.

Thus, in both her first and second parole hearings, Brenda made statements that are at odds with what is known from other sources, or which cannot be corroborated. There is insufficient evidence to classify Brenda as a traumatized shooter, or to attribute her attack to a head injury or substance abuse. Given her fascination with weapons and killing, her illegal behavior, her lack of empathy, guilt, and remorse, and her sadism, she is best placed in the psychopathic category.

Wayne Lo

Wayne Lo committed a school shooting at Simon's Rock College in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on December 14, 1992. He killed two people and wounded four, then turned himself in.

Wayne was born in Taiwan and moved to the United States when he was 12 years old. He lived with his parents and brother (approximately five years younger) in Montana. Wayne's father had been a pilot in the Nationalist China Air Force, but had since left the military. After immigrating, he opened a Chinese restaurant. The transition to a new culture was not easy for the family, but Wayne was bright and reportedly was liked and respected at school. He was also a gifted violinist who played with the Billings Symphony Orchestra. (Unless otherwise noted, the information on Wayne is drawn from Dr. Jonathan Fast's book *Ceremonial Violence: A Psychological Explanation of School Shootings*.)

Where does Wayne fit in the typology? Though the evidence is mixed, he presented with a number of features suggestive of psychopathy. For example, although Wayne was not a trouble-maker in high school, he exhibited behavior indicative of narcissism: "he was sometimes stubborn and arrogant, disagreeing with teachers whom he took to be intellectual inferi-

ors, and refusing to complete assignments which he considered pointless.”³⁴

There is also evidence that Wayne could be manipulative. He once hinted to a teacher that he was suicidal, but instead of killing himself, he stole his mother’s car and drove out of state to spend five days with a girl. On another occasion, he was disappointed with a girl’s lack of interest in him, so he told her he was going to kill himself; she called the police, who checked on Wayne, and apparently found no evidence that he was suicidal. It appears that he was just trying to get what he wanted through manipulation. (Similarly, Eric Harris once faked his own suicide to get back at a girl who had rejected him.)

A reporter for the *New York Times* who interviewed Wayne seven years after the attack was struck by Wayne’s remarkably smooth presentation: “Wayne Lo often spoke with disarming frankness. He was also manipulative, controlling and so eager to portray himself in a positive light that it was sometimes impossible to believe he thought he was telling the truth.”³⁵

When Wayne attended Simon’s Rock College, he became known for his bigotry. Extreme prejudice is often seen in people with sadistic personalities who enjoy engaging in derogatory behavior toward minority groups. This was seen in Eric Harris, who admired Hitler and made racist and homophobic comments. Similarly, Wayne and his friends made public comments against African Americans, Jews, and homosexuals.

Also like Eric Harris, Wayne made frequent comments about wanting to kill people at school. Though some people took these remarks as jokes, others did not. A peer said, “It’s not like we haven’t been afraid of Wayne and his friends ... My friends and I had been talking daily about how scary he is.”³⁶ The picture that emerges is that of an angry, intolerant young man who intimidated those around him.

A friend of Wayne’s reported another example of manipulation. The night before the shooting, Wayne said that he was writing out the Book of Revelations to give people the impression that he was crazy. Why Wayne would want people to think he was crazy became apparent the following day.

Wayne made another noteworthy comment the evening before the attack. He had told his friends that he was going to shoot people on campus. Jared, one of his friends, asked him about this. Jared said, “He changed his mood. He got very serious. I had never seen him that serious. He said, ‘Because I don’t care anymore. I don’t want to live.’”³⁷ Thus, the night before the attack Wayne indicated that he was hopeless and suicidal; he also clearly indicated that he wanted people to think he was crazy. These points are essential to keep in mind to compare with what Wayne reported later.

The next day Wayne went on his rampage in the evening. After shooting multiple people, he called the police and announced that he was the shooter. He said, “the people at Simon’s Rock needed to be taught a lesson.”³⁸ Once apprehended, Wayne’s behavior was unusual. As described by Fast, “The officers were surprised by Wayne’s calm manner and polite attitude. He wasn’t sweating, shaking, or hyperventilating.”³⁹ As noted in the sections on Robert Poulin and Brenda Spencer, the lack of emotional response in the wake of murder is striking.

So far, I have highlighted aspects of Wayne that suggest psychopathy. We also need to consider the possibilities that he was traumatized and psychotic. The evidence for trauma is minimal. Fast reported that Wayne’s father was strict and “would beat Wayne with a riding crop when he disobeyed an order.”⁴⁰ Without knowing who reported this and if the person was a reliable source, this one statement is difficult to assess. Though I do not want to minimize the potential impact this could have on a child, I do want to consider this piece of information very carefully.

Assuming that the information is accurate, we still don’t know if the beatings happened a couple of times, or were a daily event. We also don’t know how severe the punishment was, nor how Wayne viewed it. Did he see it as normal discipline or as abuse? Did he suffer posttraumatic symptoms such as nightmares and intrusive memories from it, or did he shrug it off?

This mistreatment may have contributed to Wayne’s anger without having been traumatic. When compared to the histories of the traumatized shooters presented in my book, the physical punishment Wayne endured does not appear to be of the same magnitude. Being hit by a strict father does not seem as likely to traumatize a boy as being the victim of a parent’s drunken, violent rages or repeated sexual abuse. Also, Fast did not report any post-attack allegations by Wayne that his father abused him.

One other point to keep in mind is that the father’s discipline may have been a response to Wayne’s narcissistic or psychopathic behavior. This does not justify Mr. Lo’s treatment of his son, but the beatings may have been a desperate attempt to keep an unruly child in line. If Wayne were a psychopathic boy, he may have presented significant challenges to manage. We know that he could be arrogant and oppositional at school; if he acted this way at home, too, Mr. Lo may have tried to control him the only way he knew how.

It is possible that Wayne’s mistreatment by his father contributed to his anger. It is also possible that Wayne’s behavior drove his father to treat him harshly. These are not mutually exclusive concepts. Both may be true. Given the available information, however, Wayne seems to be more of a psychopathic than a traumatized shooter.

But what about psychosis? Wayne claimed that during his attack he had acted under the belief that he was on a mission from God. Two days after the attack Wayne talked to his father: “Wayne told him that he had been told by God to study the Book of Revelations and to cleanse Simon’s Rock of sinners, the sins in question being homosexuality, drug use, and lying.”⁴¹

What are we to make of this claim? The fact that the night before the attack Wayne told a friend that he was copying the Book of Revelations so that people would think he was crazy clearly indicates that he was planning an excuse for his upcoming crime. This would seem to demolish his post-attack claim of carrying out God’s will.

Nonetheless, mental health professionals for the defense diagnosed Wayne with command hallucinations (voices that told him what to do) and paranoid delusions.⁴² One professional diagnosed Wayne with paranoid schizophrenia and

said that this condition “interfered with his [Wayne’s] ability to appreciate the criminality of his acts.”⁴³ This latter statement is hard to accept because after shooting people, Wayne then called the police to turn himself in. He obviously knew that he had committed a crime.

What about the reported psychotic symptoms (hallucinations and delusions)? Besides the fact that Wayne made it clear that he was going to fake mental illness, another concern is that there is no evidence of any psychotic symptoms prior to the attack. Nor, as far as I can tell, did Wayne exhibit any symptoms of psychosis or schizophrenia after the attack. I have not seen any reports that Wayne was ever seen talking to people who weren’t there or exhibiting paranoid behavior in prison. Not only did Wayne’s mental condition not deteriorate over time, as would be expected with schizophrenia, but he actually improved. He reached the point of no longer reporting any psychotic symptoms.

The mental health professionals for the prosecution did not diagnose Wayne as psychotic, but rather as having a narcissistic personality disorder. One doctor “was particularly struck by Wayne’s need to take control of the conversation during their 20 hours of pretrial interviews.”⁴⁴ This is a similar reaction to the journalist cited above who found Wayne smooth and manipulative. These reactions suggest a psychopathic presentation.

Despite his post-attack claims, it seems that Wayne is best viewed as a psychopathic shooter rather than a psychotic shooter with a schizophrenia-spectrum disorder. It is possible, however, that Wayne believed that killing people was a worthwhile endeavor, and maybe he even believed that God would approve. Eric Harris, for example, was preoccupied with the concept of natural selection and convinced himself that he was doing the world a favor by eliminating inferior people from the planet. Though Eric was a psychopathic shooter, his narcissism was so extreme that it may have crossed the line into delusional thinking.

Perhaps the same thing happened with Wayne. His narcissism may have been so severe that he believed he was doing the world a favor by killing “undesirable” people. Even if he believed he was doing God’s will, however, this does not mean that he was schizophrenic. He could have been, like Eric Harris, a psychopathic shooter with a grandiose self-image that may or may not have become delusional.

Luke Woodham

Luke Woodham presents significant challenges to understanding because of the contradictory evidence that exists regarding several significant issues. For example, his mother is described as being absent from his life to the point of almost being neglectful, yet she is also described as being so intrusive and enmeshed with Luke as to suggest what has been called “emotional incest.” Similarly, after Luke committed his attack in 1997, he made statements about hallucinations of demons who told him to kill people, yet he also made statements that he was completely sane and simply angry about being mistreated.

As in the cases discussed so far in this article, the conclusions presented here are tentative. (The facts presented on Luke are drawn from Jonathan Fast’s *Ceremonial Violence: A Psychological Explanation of School Shootings*, unless otherwise noted.)

On October 1, 1997, Luke killed his mother in their home. He then drove his mother’s car to school and shot his former girlfriend. He then opened fire on others. In total, he killed two girls and wounded seven other students. After the shootings, Luke tried to escape. He got back in his mother’s car and was driving away when the road was blocked by another car. Luke tried to drive through a field but the car got stuck in the mud and Luke was apprehended. He was sixteen years old. The date of the attack appears to be significant – it was the one-year anniversary of the day his girlfriend broke up with him. Also, though Luke made no attempt to kill himself during the attack, he had had suicidal thoughts previously. He also had indicated to a peer that he expected to die during the attack in a shootout with police.

Was Luke a traumatized shooter? He reportedly was picked on by his brother and harassed at school, but he was not the victim of physical or sexual abuse. As is often the case, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of how much Luke was harassed at school. Though Luke claimed to have been severely victimized, one of his friends stated that other kids had it far worse at school than Luke did.⁴⁵ This doesn’t mean that Luke was not a victim, but it suggests that he may have had an exaggerated sense of his victimization. In comparing him to Evan Ramsey, Mitchell Johnson, and Jeffrey Weise, Luke does not appear to belong in the traumatized category.

Also, though Luke made statements that the attack was in response to being harassed, the primary target of the attack was Christy Menefee, the girl who broke up with him and refused to go back out with him. She was the first person he shot, and the attack was on the anniversary of their breakup. Immediately after being apprehended, as he was riding in the police cruiser, Luke told the officer that the attack was motivated by Christy’s rejection.⁴⁶ Though this seems believable, it needs to be considered carefully, because the attack apparently was not Luke’s idea, but was done under the direction of another peer. This raises the question of motivation – did Luke kill people because they harassed him or rejected him, or because he was under the influence of someone who talked him into committing murder?

Was Luke psychopathic? His horrific killing of his pet dog raises the issue of psychopathy, but this appears to have been an atypical act conducted under the direction of his older friend, Grant Boyette. All his life Luke had loved his pets and spent hours playing with them and taking care of them. There was no pattern of animal cruelty, such as that demonstrated by Drew Golden. There was also no pattern of criminal behavior. Thus, Luke does not appear to fit in the psychopathic category.

Does Luke belong in the psychotic category? I believe he does, but the nature of his psychosis remains ambiguous. The primary confusion is whether or not Luke had hallucinations of demons. If, as he sometimes claimed, he both saw demons and heard them talking to him, then he experienced visual and auditory hallucinations. These symptoms would suggest that he

was schizophrenic. The problem, however, is that in the initial aftermath of the shooting, Luke said nothing about demons. He talked about his ex-girlfriend, and he talked about being picked on, but there was no report, and no observations, that indicated the presence of hallucinations.

Perhaps Luke did not want to appear “crazy,” so he did not immediately disclose his hallucinations. Or, perhaps he invented the symptoms later on as a way to excuse the attack by claiming that the demons told him to do it. Even if we decide that there is too little evidence to support the claim of hallucinations, this does not mean that Luke was not psychotic. Delusions are also psychotic symptoms, and there is evidence that Luke may have been delusional.

Luke had a group of friends that was led by Grant Boyette, a young man who was a couple of years older than Luke. Grant was fascinated by Hitler, and also had an interest in Satanism and magic. Luke became interested in the occult, and his interest intensified after he cast a spell on a boy and two days later a friend of the boy was killed by a car. At this point, Luke became a true believer in magic. As he said, “One second I was some kind of broken-hearted idiot, and the next second I had power over many things.”⁴⁷

Apart from Luke’s testimony, there is a report from a friend of his that Luke believed that Grant had power over demons. Luke reportedly believed that one of these demons had been outside his room one night.⁴⁸ Thus, even if Luke never saw or heard a demon (i.e., he had no hallucinations), he apparently believed in demons. He also believed he had caused a boy’s death by casting a spell.

If Luke were not sufficiently psychotic to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, perhaps he (like Dylan Klebold) had a schizotypal personality. Schizotypal personality disorder is characterized by severe interpersonal difficulties, as well as unusual ideas, beliefs, and/or experiences. For example, “these individuals may be superstitious or preoccupied with paranormal phenomena,” or “may believe that they have magical control over others.”⁴⁹ This certainly fits Luke in terms of his belief in his own magical power, thinking that he had caused a boy’s death. Also, his report that a demon sent by Grant had been outside his bedroom sounds like a good example of another feature of schizotypals: “Perceptual alterations may be present (e.g., sensing that another person is present).”⁵⁰

Luke, as with schizotypals in general, had significant social difficulties. He struggled to fit in with a peer group, and did not do well with girls. When he briefly dated Christy Menefee, he quickly alienated her with his controlling and intrusive behavior. Schizotypals often strike people as odd, and this was true of Luke: “During Luke’s infrequent appearances at school, he was so odd, disagreeable, and generally frightening that his teachers kept their distance.”⁵¹ In fact, even within his peer group, Luke sometimes stood out as rather bizarre. According to Fast, a couple of Luke’s friends found him “quite difficult to understand. Sometimes he seemed like he was from another planet.”⁵²

Thus, Luke presented with a number of features of schizotypal personality disorder: significant social difficulties, oddness that alienated both peers and adults, unusual perceptual

experiences, and beliefs in demons and his own magical ability to control the lives of others. Based on the available evidence, Luke most likely belongs in the psychotic category of school shooters.

Asa Coon

We don’t know much about Asa Coon. As far as I can tell, there have been no books written about him, and no in-depth articles or research efforts devoted to uncovering his history. As a result, this section is based on articles that were written in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. Despite the lack of information, Asa appears to belong in the traumatized category.

On October 10, 2007, Asa opened fire at his school in Cleveland, Ohio. He wounded four people, all of whom survived. He came from a broken home with a long history of significant dysfunction. He had two older brothers and a twin sister. His father lived in Florida,⁵³ though it is not known when the father separated from the mother. At age 4, Asa was the subject of a juvenile court neglect case.⁵⁴ The Coon residence was described as having a yard littered with dog feces and debris, and Asa was said to often come to school with his face dirty, his clothes shabby, and his hair unkempt. In 2000, there was an investigation of the family by the Department of Children and Family Services because Asa was found with scratches on his forehead and burns on his arms.⁵⁵

When Asa was 12, he was charged with domestic violence because of his aggressive behavior toward his mother. His older brother, Stephen, had a long history of violent and illegal behavior. Charges against him included intimidation, burglary, assault, sale of counterfeit drugs, attempted assault, and weapons charges. He was in prison for two years.⁵⁶ Stephen was also charged with domestic violence and assault by age 13.⁵⁷ Both Stephen and Daniel (another brother) “threatened neighbors with weapons, including rocks, knives, and a fake bomb.”⁵⁸ Police made five visits to the home since 2006 in response to calls about domestic violence, assault, property crime, and a hit-and-run accident.⁵⁹ In addition to the apparent chaos and violence at home, there are consistent reports that Asa was harassed at school and in the neighborhood. This often involved fights and beatings.⁶⁰ Despite growing up amid violence, there are reports that Asa was often polite⁶¹ and ignored his peers’ harassment.⁶²

Nonetheless, Asa had several placements out of the home as his behavior deteriorated. He was sent to a shelter pending a placement in a detention center. While in the shelter, he attempted suicide. After being placed in the detention facility, Asa was sent to a mental hospital.⁶³

Asa shares a number of characteristics with other traumatized school shooters (Evan Ramsey, Mitchell Johnson, Jeffrey Weise). Asa’s father was essentially absent from his life as a result of geography. Asa did not always live at home, being in and out of several placements. Perhaps most importantly, there was a family history of illegal firearm use. This was the case with all three of the other traumatized shooters. In fact, there

Table 1: Three Psychopathic Shooters

Name	Age	Father	Chest Deformity	Thwarted Military Ambitions	Lied on Application to Military
Wayne Lo	18	Retired Air Force Pilot			
Robert Poulin	18	Retired Air Force Pilot	X	X	X
Eric Harris	18	Retired Air Force Pilot	X	X	X

are interesting parallels between Asa and Evan Ramsey in this regard. Though we don't know if Asa's father misused firearms, we do know that Asa's brother did. A comparison of certain events between the two boys' families is noteworthy.

Evan's father was in prison for a variety of charges, including some related to the illegal use of firearms. Asa's brother was in prison for a variety of charges, including some related to the illegal use of firearms. About six weeks before Evan's attack, his father was released from prison. About six weeks before Asa's attack, his brother was released from prison.⁶⁴ Five days before his attack, Evan's brother was arrested for armed robbery. Two days before his attack, Asa's brother was arrested for armed robbery.⁶⁵

In addition to these similarities, both boys had disciplinary problems at school shortly before their attacks. Evan had a CD player confiscated, and Asa was suspended for fighting.⁶⁶ Furthermore, they both were harassed at school, had histories of fighting, and had been suicidal. Finally, both Evan and Asa gave plenty of warning to their peers of what they were about to do.⁶⁷

Psychopathic Shooters: A Discussion

Five psychopathic shooters are presented in this article and my book. They are Robert Poulin, Brenda Spencer, Wayne Lo, Drew Golden, and Eric Harris. Of the five, two stand out as different due to age or sex: Brenda is the only female, and Drew was only 11 years old (the others were all 16 or older). Leaving these two cases aside for the moment, let's look at the three who are left: Robert, Wayne, and Eric. The chart above illustrates two features they have in common – age and father's work history.

These similarities are interesting, but although we can speculate on what they might mean (if anything), the best we can do is generate hypotheses. Why age 18? Could this be related to "coming of age," reaching manhood? Or might it be related to stages in their lives? In Eric's case, the attack was shortly before graduation from high school. Perhaps the problem for Eric was not high school, but graduation. He had no formal plans for after graduation. He had nothing to live for and could not envision life after high school.

This was not the case for Wayne, however, who was already at college. And Robert, though still in high school, committed his shooting in October rather than shortly before graduation. In these two cases, the question of why the attacks occurred

when the shooters were 18 remains a mystery.

The most striking parallel among the three shooters is that they all had fathers who had been air force pilots but had since left the military and begun other careers. This is particularly interesting because the fathers were from three different countries: Canada, China, and the United States. Beyond the common military backgrounds, what do we make of the fact that all three had fathers in the air force? Why not other branches of the military? Perhaps the air force connection is simply a coincidence.

Beyond this coincidence, however, is the fact that psychopathic shooters appear to come from families in which the use of firearms is prominent and legal (compared to the traumatized shooters who had father-figures who engaged in the illegal use of firearms). Robert, Wayne, and Eric came from military families. Besides Eric's father having been in the Air Force, his paternal grandfather served in WWII and his maternal grandfather had also been in the military.⁶⁸

How do the other two psychopathic shooters fit into this pattern? Drew Golden's parents were the leaders of a pistol association, his grandfather was a game warden and hunter, and Drew grew up handling firearms from a young age. Though I have not found any direct evidence that Brenda Spencer's father used guns, this seems like a good possibility. Brenda was using firearms at age 11 if not earlier, and a father who buys his teenage daughter a rifle for her birthday seems likely to be familiar with weapons. A father that had no experience with firearms would not be likely to buy such a present for his daughter.

It is also perhaps noteworthy that both Eric and Robert were not good physical specimens. Both of them had chest deformities and other medical issues (Eric was born with a leg problem and Robert was too near-sighted to be a pilot). In addition, both boys, as well as Wayne, were on the small side. Robert was behind in his physical development. Eric was thin and relatively short (compared to his brother and many of his friends) and complained about being small. Wayne was only 5'5" and reportedly was quite sensitive about his size.⁶⁹ In addition, Drew Golden was small for his age and Brenda Spencer was only 5'1" tall and weighed 90 pounds. Perhaps undersized physiques carrying oversized egos is a dangerous combination.

(It may also be of interest that Hitler reportedly had a sunken chest.⁷⁰ He also was initially rejected by the military as "unfit for full or limited duty, too weak, unfit to bear arms."⁷¹ Many rampage shooters had military aspirations that ended in failure; see my blog, "The Career Aspirations of Shooters.")

Eric viewed people as inferior and therefore unworthy to

live. Wayne reportedly sought to kill people who were sinners and therefore unworthy to live. Also, Robert Poulin wrote a comment in a book that said, “You are all sinners – be sorry.” It’s not much to go on, but perhaps he shared a similar mindset with Eric and Wayne. Maybe he saw himself as ridding the world of sinners or inferior people.

Finally, Brenda differs from the others in that at the time of the attack there was no apparent rage or depression. All the other psychopathic shooters appear to have experienced either severe anger and/or depression, often with suicidal thoughts. Brenda’s attack stands alone as one that seemingly was done for the sheer pleasure of killing.

Psychotic Shooters: A Discussion

How does Luke Woodham compare to the five psychotic shooters presented in my book? One feature that is consistent across all six psychotic shooters is that they were the youngest siblings in their families. In addition, they all had higher functioning siblings. In Luke’s case, his mother “encouraged him to be more like his brother John, who had been ‘Mr. Popular’ in high school.”⁷⁰ This is a similar situation to that faced by the five psychotic shooters presented in my book. Being the only child in the family to struggle with serious psychological issues appears to have devastating effects. Such children tend to feel like misfits in their own families. Their social difficulties at school then exacerbate the situation.

Of the five other psychotic shooters, Luke is most like Dylan Klebold, who also presented with features of schizotypal personality disorder. They both had a difficult time with social interactions. They both felt extremely lonely and longed desperately for a relationship with a girl. They also both had thoughts of being superior to others. Whereas Dylan fantasized about being a godlike being, Luke simply looked down on his classmates as not being as intelligent as he was.

In addition to their schizotypal features, they appear to have shared other traits. I wrote in my book about Dylan’s preoccupation with, and magnification of, his own suffering. This indicated features of a masochistic personality. It seems that Luke may have also been preoccupied with his own suffering, perhaps magnifying it through his obsessive ruminating on all the things that had gone wrong in his life.

Luke parallels Dylan in another important feature – his excessive dependence on others. Luke could not deal with Christy breaking up with him, and kept after her to reunite. This suggests features of a dependent personality (this could also be seen as part of borderline personality disorder). When it came to male peers, Luke attached himself to Grant Boyette. There are multiple statements by their friends that Grant dominated Luke and could manipulate him to do things he wouldn’t do on his own. This is reminiscent of Dylan’s attaching himself to Eric Harris and essentially giving up his own personality in an attempt to bond himself to Eric.

As noted earlier, Luke’s killing of his pet was out of character; he had always loved animals and taken very good care

of his pets. Under Grant’s influence, however, Luke committed atrocities against his dog. Similarly, Grant told Luke repeatedly that instead of moping over Christy, he should kill her. Grant also reportedly told Luke to kill his mother (Grant had also told another friend in the group to kill his father). It appears that Luke was so desperate to be liked, that he surrendered himself to Grant’s influence.

Grant was like Eric Harris in his admiration of Hitler and his desire for power over others. Though Eric sought power through violence and grandiose fantasies of destruction, and Grant sought power through Satanism and magic (as well as murder by proxy), the drive was the same. Eric fantasized about world destruction, and so did Luke, Grant, and their buddies.⁷¹ Grant also appeared to be expert at impression management. He was ostentatious in his Christian devotion, but behind closed doors he was studying Satanism.

Thus, both Luke and Dylan attached themselves to eighteen-year-old boys with psychopathic traits who sought power and domination over others. The fundamental difference is that whereas Grant directed Luke’s murders from behind the scenes, Eric was the leader in the attack at Columbine.

In looking at the six psychotic shooters, four of them acted alone. These four all appear to have been schizophrenic. The two schizotypals, Dylan and Luke, acted under the influence of an older, dominant peer.

Traumatized Shooters: A Discussion

Asa Coon shares similarities with the other traumatized shooters, including growing up in a broken home with an absent father and domestic violence, and being placed outside of the home on several occasions. It is not known if either parent engaged in substance abuse or criminal behavior. Asa, like the others, had family role models for the misuse of firearms. He did not, however, have peer support or encouragement for the attack. This makes him different from the other traumatized shooters. Another difference is that the other traumatized shooters came from small, remote communities, whereas Asa lived in an urban setting.

The Expanded Sample

Adding the five shooters from this article to the chart from my book, we see both consistencies and inconsistencies (see next page). The pattern of firearm use among older males (father, stepfather, or brother) remains largely consistent. The psychopathic shooters came from families where there was legal gun use. The traumatized shooters came from families where there was illegal gun use. Firearms use in the families of psychotic shooters does not appear to have played a significant role.

The role of peer influence is less consistent, but still of interest. The two psychopathic shooters presented in my book (Drew Golden and Eric Harris) recruited non-psychopathic peers to join them in their attacks. This was not the case with

Table 2: The Expanded Sample

Name	Legal use of guns by father	Illegal use of guns by older male	Recruited Peers	Influenced by Peers	Category
Brenda Spencer	Suspected				Psychopathic
Robert Poulin	X				Psychopathic
Wayne Lo	X				Psychopathic
Drew Golden	X		X		Psychopathic
Eric Harris	X		X		Psychopathic
Michael Carneal					Psychotic (schizophrenic)
Andrew Wurst					Psychotic (schizophrenic)
Kip Kinkel					Psychotic (schizophrenic)
Seung Hui Cho					Psychotic (schizophrenic)
Luke Woodham				X	Psychotic (schizotypal)
Dylan Klebold				X	Psychotic (schizotypal)
Evan Ramsey		X		X	Traumatized
Mitchell Johnson		X		X	Traumatized
Jeffrey Weise		X		X	Traumatized
Asa Coon		X			Traumatized

Robert Poulin, Brenda Spencer, or Wayne Lo. What we can say at this point is that though there is no consistent pattern of psychopaths recruiting peers, in the two attacks involving two perpetrators, the “teams” were led by psychopaths.

The case of Luke Woodham is related to this issue, because though he did not have a partner in his attack, he was following the orders of an older boy who appears to have had psychopathic traits. As with Eric and Dylan, Grant Boyette and Luke Woodham formed a team consisting of a psychopathic boy in charge, with a schizotypal boy as a follower.

This raises the possibility of two subtypes of psychotic shooters: those who were schizophrenic and acted alone, and those who were schizotypal and acted under the influence of an older boy with psychopathic features. The sample sizes are so small, however, that this suggestion is highly tentative.

Among the traumatized shooters, Asa Coon is the only one who apparently had no peer influence to commit the attack. In the cases of the other three traumatized shooters, they each had friends who encouraged them to go on a rampage, and in each case these friends were charged for their roles in the attacks.

Conclusion

By expanding the sample, we have a broader range of data from

which to draw conclusions. The five cases presented in this article appear to fall into the three categories of shooters identified previously. With the addition of these cases to the sample, some patterns found earlier were supported, and others were not. This is to be expected. The larger the population under study, the more variable the results will be. Nonetheless, there are intriguing trends that are worthy of continued research.

Notes

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- 6 Ibid., p. 63.
- 7 Ibid., p. 39.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
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