

T.J. Lane: Further Reflections

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

When I wrote about T.J. Lane in my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, I categorized him as a traumatized school shooter. After all, he had many features common among traumatized perpetrators: a broken home, a life of bouncing back and forth among relatives, substance abusing parents, and a mother and father who were both violent and both incarcerated at times.

Lane's post-attack behavior, however, has led to me to wonder if he is not simply a traumatized shooter, but also a psychopathic one. When he was apprehended by police, he reportedly was calm.¹ Many shooters have been in a state of extreme agitation following their attacks. Those who have been calm in the wake of murder have generally been psychopathic.

Also, unlike other traumatized shooters who survived their attacks, such as Evan Ramsey, Mitchell Johnson, and Jamie Rouse, Lane apparently has not apologized or appeared remorseful about killing three people and wounding three others. Not only has he not been contrite, he has gone out of his way to be offensive. At his sentencing, he wore a button-down shirt that he removed to reveal a t-shirt where he had scrawled the word "Killer" (he had worn a short that said "Killer" on the day of his attack).² He then made a remarkably vulgar comment to the families of his victims: "This hand that pulled the trigger, that killed your sons, now masturbates to the memory."³ He then stuck up his middle finger and said, "Fuck all of you." During the sentencing he was smiling and smirking, acting like he found the hearing amusing.

It could be argued that he was a scared young man putting on a brave front in the face of being sent to prison for the rest of his life, but his demeanor and the calculated nastiness of his comment to grieving families was strikingly callous. And callousness, along with an absence of guilt or remorse, is a trait seen in psychopathic shooters.

Further evidence of psychopathic traits emerged when it became known that Lane has been a problematic prisoner. A report made public in 2014 documents that Lane has engaged in a variety of defiant behavior and misconduct, including tattooing himself, refusing to do any work in his education classes, contraband substance use (marijuana and Dilantin), being out of bounds, and urinating on a building wall.⁴ None of these constitute severe misconduct, but they indicate a pattern of disrespect for authority and rejection of rules, qualities that are often seen among psychopathic shooters.

Even more significantly, in 2014 Lane actually plotted and succeeded in breaking out of prison. He was on the run for six hours before being recaptured.⁵ This act again demonstrates a disregard for law. It might also indicate a refusal to accept the consequences of one's actions and/or thrill-seeking behavior,

THOMAS "T.J." LANE

Date: **27 February 2012**
School: **Chardon High School**
Location: **Chardon, OH**
Age: **17**
Killed: **3**
Wounded: **3**
Outcome: **Prison**
Shooter population: **Secondary school**
Psychological type: **Traumatized / Psychopathic**
Attack type: **Mixed**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see "About the Site" at schoolshooters.info.

breaking out just for the pleasure of proving that he could do so. It also presumably involved deception. All of these traits are in keeping with psychopathy.

Another key event occurred in 2014 – an appeals hearing in which Lane challenged his conviction. The report from this hearing provides evidence of Lane’s deceitfulness in several areas. First, he had previously denied knowing any of his victims, claiming that he randomly shot strangers. Debunking this claim, a victim’s mother reported that her son had driven Lane home and was always kind to him, and another victim’s mother said that her son and Lane had been friends.⁶

During his competency evaluation, Lane had reported a variety of mental health symptoms, including auditory hallucinations, delusions, anxiety, confusion, and fears of losing his mind. He later admitted that he simply lied to appear schizophrenic. He continued to feign mental illness in jail, however, including depression and suicidal thoughts, even forcing himself to cry to appear distraught. He also claimed he was claustrophobic to avoid being segregated from other inmates. In addition, he claimed that he had been sexually abused because he figured it “couldn’t hurt” to make such a claim.⁷ He eventually confessed that all of these were lies. The frequency of his dishonesty shows his ability and willingness to deceive and manipulate people.

Though Lane had claimed to feel regret in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the court concluded that his “conduct at sentencing showed a complete lack of remorse.”⁸ The court also noted that Lane “said he did not know why he shot people. He said it was just something he chose to do. The court stated that, while appellant’s motive was unclear, it appeared he wanted to make a name for himself and to make front page news.”⁹ It is not clear if Lane articulated the desire for fame or if this was an interpretation by the court. It is interesting, however, that two months before his attack Lane posted a poem online that included the lines, “He longed for only one thing, the world to bow at his feet,” and “He was better than the rest, all those ones he detests.”¹⁰ Feeling superior to others, looking down on people, and the desire for the world to bow at his feet all fit with the narcissism of a psychopath.

◆ ◆ ◆

If Lane does indeed have elements of both a traumatized and a psychopathic school shooter, he would be the first I have found. Two other psychopathic shooters, Charles Whitman and Wayne Lo, had abusive fathers, but they did not have the complex history that is seen in traumatized shooters. For example, they both came from intact marriages, and their parents were not drug addicts or alcoholics and had no history of arrests or incarcerations. Neither Whitman nor Lo bounced around from mother

to father to grandparents, and so on. Though there was some level of violence in the homes (details are lacking for both), the severe family dysfunction associated with traumatized shooters was not present. In *School Shooters*, I suggested that they be considered primarily as psychopathic shooters, with a secondary categorization as traumatized. Lane, however, seems to fit in both categories.

Interestingly, like Lane, Wayne Lo attempted to fake mental illness. Another psychopathic shooter, Robert Benjamin Smith, also tried this tactic. In addition, Lane’s calmness in the wake of murder resembles the nonchalant post-attack behavior of other psychopathic shooters such as Robert Benjamin Smith, Brenda Spencer, Barry Loukaitis, Drew Golden, and Charles “Andy” Williams. To murder people, especially people you know, especially at close range, is generally a devastating act that causes gut-wrenching emotions. To gun down his friends and apparently not care about them or their families is remarkably callous.

Finally, if Lane indeed were interested in “making a name” for himself, this parallels the desire of other psychopathic shooters. Robert Benjamin Smith said after his attack that his motivation included wanting people to know who he was. Eric Harris wrote that he wanted to leave a lasting impression on the world, and speculated about who would make a movie about him. Brenda Spencer was excited to be on television, as was Wayne Lo, who also hoped a movie would be made about him.

In summary, the initial information available on Lane focused on his unusually violent and dysfunctional family, leading me to categorize him as a traumatized school shooter. As time has gone by since the attack, Lane’s behavior both in court and in prison suggests that in addition to his traumatic family history he has psychopathic personality traits.

NOTES

- 1 Rachel Dissell, “Suspected Chardon Shooter’s Appearance in Geauga County Juvenile Court Offers Little Insight on His Mind-Set,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 29 February 2012.
- 2 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*. Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 3 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*, p. 10.
- 4 “T.J. Lane Discipline File.” Available at www.schoolshooters.info.
- 5 Ed Payne and Cristy Lenz. “Convicted High School Shooter T.J. Lane Back in Custody After Prison Escape.” *CNN*. 12 September 2014.
- 6 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*, pp. 10-11.
- 7 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*, p. 8-9.
- 8 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*, p. 31.
- 9 2014: *Ohio v. Lane*, p. 30.
- 10 “T.J. Lane’s Facebook Post.” Available at www.schoolshooters.info.