
School Shooters — Nine Brief Sketches

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I have presented a three-part typology of school shooters in several previous works.¹ The three categories are psychopathic, psychotic, and traumatized. Psychopathic shooters are narcissistic; reject rules, laws, and morality; lack empathy; and often are sadistic. Psychotic shooters are schizophrenic or have schizotypal personality disorder. They are out of touch with reality, experiencing hallucinations or delusions, or more generally having difficulty knowing what is real and what is not. They also have poor social and emotional functioning. Traumatized shooters have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse. They generally come from poor, fragmented families where there is substance abuse and/or criminal behavior in at least one parent.

This article presents brief discussions about nine school shooters in an effort to enlarge the samples in the three categories. The profiles of the shooters are not intended to summarize their lives, but simply to provide sufficient information to place them within the typology. In some cases there is enough information available to allow the shooters to be categorized with confidence. In other cases, information is scant and the categorizations are tentative. The cases will be presented in chronological order. A final section will compare these cases to others within with typology.

THE SHOOTERS

ERIC HOUSTON
Lindhurst High School · Olivehurst, California · 1 May 1992

Houston was twenty years old when he killed four people and wounded ten others. One of the fatalities was a teacher, Robert Brens, who allegedly had molested Houston and then failed him, preventing Houston from graduating with his class in 1989. At the time of the shooting, Houston lived with his mother and stepbrother. Stressors leading up to

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the attack included losing his job, a breakup with a girlfriend, and family plans for him to move out and live on his own.² He reportedly lost his job a month before the attack and felt like a failure, having failed to graduate and being unemployed.³

Though Houston's claim of molestation by his teacher was challenged in court, a friend of his testified that Houston told him three different times that a teacher would not allow him to graduate if he didn't perform a "sexual favor."⁴ It was reported that Houston talked about the molestation months before his attack.⁵ Though the truth of the allegation was debated, if the sexual abuse occurred, this would support categorizing Houston as a traumatized shooter.

In addition, according to Jonathan Fast, Houston suffered "violent physical abuse" as a young child.⁶ Fast does not specify the perpetrator of the abuse, however. He does note that Houston's father abandoned the family when Houston was two years old. Fast also reports that Houston had spinal meningitis as a child and that his life was in danger from the severity of the illness. Thus, Houston suffered from physical abuse when he was very young, as well as alleged sexual abuse as an adolescent, plus an illness that was severe enough to have perhaps constituted a traumatic experience.

GARY SCOTT PENNINGTON

East Carter High School · Grayson, Kentucky · 18 January 1993

Pennington was seventeen when he shot and killed two people at his school. He was a traumatized shooter. Once, when he was addressed as Gary, he said, "I want to be called Scott. My father's name is Gary and I hate my father."⁷ His father reportedly was alcoholic and used drugs. He physically abused Pennington and Pennington's mother. In addition to the father's problematic behavior, the mother was said to be psychotic.⁸ The family lived in poverty, supported by welfare and odd jobs. The family was so poor that, according to one source, "Pennington was embarrassed by the family's dilapidated wooden house with no telephone, toilet or running water."⁹

Besides his history of abuse, other stressors for Pennington included moving to Grayson five months before the attack and the break-up with his only girlfriend shortly before Christmas, 1992.

In addition, Pennington was harassed at school for stuttering. He was also the victim of at least one violent assault at school by a peer who said he "punched Pennington's nose and kneed him during a fight."¹⁰ Another student testified that Pennington had been physically and verbally harassed at school since sixth grade.¹¹ According to Jonathan Fast, "His classmates teased him about his appearance, his stutter, his skinny limbs, thick glasses, odd haircut, and 'momma's boy' behavior, and called him 'nerd,' 'geek,' and 'dork.'"¹² In fact, members of his family also were said to have made fun of him.¹³

JAMIE ROUSE

Richland High School · Lynville, Tennessee · 15 November 1995

Rouse was seventeen years old when he killed two people and wounded one at his school. Rouse was another traumatized shooter. His father severely abused drugs and alcohol. He was a violent man who beat his kids with belts and paddles. The father punched six holes in the walls of their home; each time he did this he was drunk. He

once blasted six pet cats with a shotgun and flung the carcasses into trees. He spent a night in jail on four occasions, twice for reckless driving and twice for driving under the influence. Rouse's father also used marijuana, Quaaludes, amphetamines, cocaine, crank, and PCP.¹⁴

Rouse reported one occasion of abuse: "My Daddy came in there, and he raised me by the arm, and [he started whipping] the back of my legs, and my butt too, and he just kept doing it. I had bruises and welts, even a few days afterward. I just lay there and cried on the floor."¹⁵

Rouse apparently reported a history of having been bullied as a child at school and ostracized in high school,¹⁶ but no details are known. He did have friends in high school but may have been ostracized by some peers.

Other stressors for Rouse included academic stress and working a job from 2:00 PM until 10:00 PM. He began using over-the-counter drugs to help him stay awake, as well as to help him sleep. He also began drinking beer and using marijuana. He received four traffic tickets within nine months and had his license suspended. Shortly before his attack, he was mistakenly accused of truancy, and he had a fender-bender that might have resulted in his losing his license again.

Though Rouse fits the traumatized category, there are reports that he had mild hallucinations when he was a child. These included seeing a shadow-like image and hearing whispering that he could not hear well enough to understand. Given the severity of trauma he experienced and the lack of symptoms of schizophrenia when he was older, it seems most likely that the mild psychotic symptoms were a result of trauma or depression rather than a schizophrenia-spectrum disorder.

JASON HOFFMAN

Granite Hills High School · El Cajon, California · 22 March 2001

Hoffman was eighteen years old when he wounded one teacher and three students at his high school. Details of Hoffman's early years are sketchy. His parents never married. According to his mother, his father was alcoholic. Hoffman's mother, Denise Marquez, said she left his father after he threw three-month-old Hoffman across the room at her. The father later reportedly threw one-year-old Hoffman into a swimming pool to see how long it would take him to float. When Hoffman was seven, his father allegedly urinated on him in the shower. The father, however, "denied any wrongdoing."¹⁷

Reportedly, "Court records released to researchers after his [Hoffman's] death indicate that his childhood had been marred by parental violence and alcohol and substance abuse."¹⁸ Based on this information, and the lack of any evidence suggesting psychopathic or psychotic features, Hoffman appears to belong in the traumatized category.

The triggering event for the shooting appears to have been Hoffman's rejection by the Navy. Less than twenty-four hours after receiving word that he was rejected, he committed his attack. He reportedly blamed the school's dean for the rejection and intended to kill him, though he did not succeed in his attempt.

Hoffman was described as an angry, isolated young man. He was not harassed, however, because he was big and intimidating, and students were afraid of him.¹⁹ Another factor in his attack may have been the news that he did not have enough credits to graduate.²⁰

Steinhäuser was nineteen years old when he committed his attack. There are no reports that he had a history of abuse or trauma and no indication that he was psychotic. In addition, there are reports that suggest narcissism, as well as evidence of a pattern of deception and a blatant disregard for rules that suggests psychopathic tendencies.

Steinhäuser was not bullied or ostracized. A peer who knew him “described Steinhäuser as someone who was ‘full of life,’ meeting friends daily and going to the disco at weekends.”²¹ Though one peer said that Steinhäuser did not have many friends,²² this was contradicted by another peer who described him as a charismatic but rebellious young man: “He was insubordinate in school, attracting attention. Students loved it. Everybody got on with him and everybody liked him. I remember that he once told me that one time he wanted everybody to know him and just be famous.”²³

The description of his popularity among the students, insubordination, and desire for fame suggests possible narcissistic features. Steinhäuser described himself in an essay as someone “who is sometimes difficult to bear” and noted that people’s opinions of him ranged from “likable” to “cannot stand him.”²⁴ Though this does not necessarily mean he was narcissistic, his comments show an awareness that his behavior could be overbearing. He reportedly was rude to teachers, and his report card included comments such as “doesn’t respond to discipline well.”²⁵

Steinhäuser’s major conduct problems involved his skipping school so he could hang out at local gun clubs and practice his shooting. To cover his truancy, he forged notes from physicians. When this was discovered, he was expelled.²⁶ The expulsion occurred in February 2001. He committed further deception by never telling his mother he had been suspended, leaving the house each morning for two months as if he were going to school.²⁷ It is also believed by police that Steinhäuser “had been tearing up letters sent to his home by the school.”²⁸

Prior to this, in the year 2000 Steinhäuser was caught smoking a cigar on a school field trip and was confronted by a teacher. Steinhäuser, who was drunk, formed a gun with his hand, pointed at the teacher, and said, “Rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat, you’re dead.”²⁹ Not only did Steinhäuser defy school rules about smoking and drinking; he was belligerent when confronted and engaged in an eerie foreshadowing of his attack. In fact, the teacher who confronted him was one of the faculty whom Steinhäuser killed.

Unlike most rampage shooters, Steinhäuser specifically targeted teachers. His attack occurred during a major examination, and it has been hypothesized that Steinhäuser was seeking revenge against the school for having expelled him and denied him the opportunity to take the exam. Steinhäuser killed twelve teachers, an administrator, a police officer, and two students who apparently were hit randomly.³⁰ A student who knew Steinhäuser commented, “I think the teachers got on his nerves.”³¹

Assuming that his attack was an act of revenge for a perceived wrong, this would be in keeping with psychopathy. Psychopaths generally feel like victims, no matter what they have done to bring about their own difficulties. Steinhäuser skipped school to shoot guns at a club, forged his absence notes, got caught and was punished. In his mind, however, he apparently saw himself as the victim.

Steinhäuser’s expressed desire to be famous and have everyone know him is sim-

ilar to Eric Harris's desire for fame. As Harris wrote, "I want to leave a lasting impression on the world."³² Also, Brenda Spencer, another psychopathic shooter, had fame in mind before her attack and told her friends they would see her on television. Two other psychopathic shooters, Gang Lu and Valery Fabrikant, also sought media attention prior to or after their attacks.³³

Steinhäuser's insubordination and problems with teachers are reminiscent of Andrew Golden, a psychopathic shooter who reportedly committed murder because he was tired of his teachers' "crap." Other psychopathic shooters have had issues with authority figures in the form of police officers. Eric Harris and Brenda Spencer both had a particular hatred for the police. It is perhaps significant that besides shooting teachers and an administrator, Steinhäuser also killed a police officer. Spencer also shot and wounded a police officer, and Harris shot at officers but did not hit anyone. Another psychopathic shooter, Wayne Lo, was enraged when he was disciplined by the administration and threatened to "bring the school to its knees." Thus, rage against authority figures is a repeated theme among the psychopathic shooters.

ALVARO CASTILLO

Orange High School · Hillsborough, North Carolina · 30 August 2006

Alvaro Castillo murdered his father at home and then shot and wounded two students at his school. He was eighteen years old. Castillo had multiple psychotic symptoms. His paranoid delusions were described in a court report as follows:

He believed he was being watched through cameras in air vents. He believed that he was being watched by a picture of a woman in the bathroom; he turned the picture over whenever he used the bathroom. His belief that he was being watched led him to keep the blinds in his room closed. He was afraid that the FBI or the CIA was watching him, and he wore a jacket and a hat to conceal himself from them.³⁴

Castillo was fascinated by Columbine and planned to kill himself on 20 April 2006, which was the seventh anniversary of the attack. His father, however, intervened in Castillo's suicide attempt. Castillo interpreted this to mean that God wanted him to be alive so that he could carry out his own rampage attack.

Castillo was obsessed with ideas of sin and sacrifice. He viewed the world as a sinful place and believed that by murdering students he would be protecting them from the world's evil. He wrote, "Sacrifice will occur and those children will be freed from evil ... We have to die and leave this sick, drinking, sex-crazed, drug using, sadistic, masochistic world."³⁵ He also wrote, "I will sacrifice those children so they will not suffer the harsh consequences and hardships of life"³⁶ and "I think I must do a massacre ... And I'm not doing it for revenge. I love that school. I'm doing it to save them."³⁷

Castillo, on the day of his attack, showed recognition that the attack was morally wrong: "I am sorry! Sorry for everything. I am sick. Mentally ill."³⁸ After the attack, however, when his mother asked if he wanted to go to confession, Castillo said, "What do I have to confess about? I didn't do anything bad. I did the right thing."³⁹

After the attack, Castillo reported apparent auditory hallucinations:

He told a doctor at the hospital that he had an imaginary twin named Red who had told him to commit the shootings at Orange High School. He said that Red told him to do terrible things all the time — to hurt and rape people, and to make people rape Alvaro. He said it was the first time he had ever acted on any of Red's orders.⁴⁰

Castillo clearly presented with a range of psychotic symptoms, and thus is categorized as a psychotic school shooter. Though prosecution and defense often argue over the presence of mental health symptoms, in Castillo's case, "every mental health expert who examined Alvaro Castillo after the shootings agreed that he was psychotic."⁴¹

Castillo's reported symptoms resemble some of those of Seung Hui Cho, another psychotic shooter. Cho also believed he was a savior-like figure coming to the rescue of innocent children. Cho also railed against the hedonism of the people around him. In addition, Cho also talked about a twin brother that he did not actually have. Furthermore, Cho's writing is notable for the consistent imagery of victimization, including a preoccupation with rape. In neither case, however, is there any indication that the perpetrators had ever been victims of sexual assault.

ERIC HAINSTOCK

Weston High School · Cazenovia, Wisconsin · 26 September 2006

Hainstock was fifteen years old when he shot and killed the principal of his school. Rampage attacks are defined, at least partly, as attacks involving more than one victim. Hainstock is included here because though there was only one victim, he may have intended a larger scale attack. He carried two loaded firearms plus additional ammunition. He also had made references to Columbine.⁴² When he showed up at the school, a janitor saw him with the shotgun and wrestled it from him. Hainstock then moved on and shot the principal and was immediately apprehended. If things had gone differently, there might have been more victims.

Hainstock clearly fits the category of traumatized school shooters. A timeline of his life documents numerous incidents of mistreatment.⁴³ Hainstock came from a broken home with violent parents. His father abused Hainstock severely and utilized harsh punishments. A woman who dated the father first secured a restraining order against him to protect herself, and then secured one to protect her children. The abuse of Hainstock was so bad that the father was charged with felony child abuse (though the charge was later reduced and eventually dismissed.)

Hainstock says both parents beat him, kicked him, slapped him and threw things at him. His dad made him hold hot sauce and peppers in his mouth, which burned so bad "I couldn't breathe or swallow," and run laps in the yard, sometimes for hours. He couldn't stop to urinate; "I would have to pee in my pants or pull it out while I ran."⁴⁴

Hainstock was also physically abused by his adoptive mother, physically abused by his biological mother's new husband, and sexually abused at a very early age by his stepbrother. Hainstock exhibited inappropriate sexual behavior when he was four years old.⁴⁵

In addition to the abuse at home, Hainstock was bullied at school. He also, however, bullied other students. By his report, the mistreatment he received was far worse than

what he did to others. His peers gave mixed reports on this, but there seems to be no question that he was taunted and tormented by his peers.

Regardless of whether Hainstock's intention was to commit a rampage attack or a targeted attack, he clearly was a traumatized school shooter.

TIM KRETSCHMER

Albertville-Realschule · Winnenden, Germany · 9 March 2009

Kretschmer was seventeen when he committed his attack at the school from which he had graduated the previous year. He appears to have targeted females, killing eight female students and three female teachers. He also killed one male student, as well as shooting people after he left the school in an apparent attempt to escape. One of the first victims was a female peer who had turned him down at a party at his house.⁴⁶

There are few clues as to Kretschmer's psychological makeup. There are hints, however, of possible narcissistic traits that suggest that he would best fit in the category of psychopathic shooters. The evidence, however, is minimal, and this is a very tentative hypothesis.

Kretschmer shared several features with Andrew Golden, a psychopathic school shooter. Like Golden, Kretschmer was reported to be a spoiled child.⁴⁷ When he lost at table tennis, Kretschmer reportedly would have a tantrum, cry, and even throw his paddle. He reportedly denigrated his own teammates. When his coach talked to Kretschmer's mother about his inappropriate behavior, she actually defended her son.⁴⁸ This is similar to Andrew Golden's being reprimanded at school and his parents defending his problematic behavior.

Kretschmer "was a poor loser and would always blame his losses on outside circumstances."⁴⁹ Psychopaths are notorious for not accepting responsibility and assigning blame outside themselves. This, of course, is not unique to psychopaths, but it is worth noting.

Though Kretschmer reportedly had never been bullied, a girl reported that he had recently complained to her that students mocked him and teachers ignored him.⁵⁰ Complaining that teachers ignored him is noteworthy and suggests thwarted narcissism. For example, Eric Harris, another psychopathic shooter, complained that he was not treated with the respect he deserved and was not given sufficient compliments. He wanted to be recognized for his wisdom, and this desire was frustrated.⁵¹

Another factor that suggests psychopathic traits is Kretschmer's behavior during the attack. Psychotic and traumatized shooters typically either exhibit rage and anguish or seem to be mentally absent during their attacks. Eric Harris, however, was laughing as he killed people at point-blank range. He appeared to be having the time of his life committing murder. Similarly, Brenda Spencer had a great time shooting people; she acted like it was sport. Both Harris and Spencer were psychopathic shooters.

Kretschmer, like Harris and Spencer, was remarkably nonchalant during the attack, even after he had killed many people. During his escape, he kidnapped a driver. When the driver asked why he was killing people, Kretschmer said, "For fun, because it's fun." He reportedly was in a carefree mood and at one point asked the driver, "Shall I get out now, shoot a bit, have a bit of fun?"⁵² This calmness in the wake of murder suggests a

profound lack of empathy, and his pleasure in killing indicates a sadistic nature. These traits are in keeping with a psychopathic personality.

WELLINGTON DE OLIVEIRA

Tasso da Silveira Municipal School · Rio de Janeiro, Brazil · 7 April 2011

De Oliveira killed ten girls and two boys and wounded ten other students. He committed his attack at the school he had attended from 1999 to 2002. He was twenty-three years old and gunned down children of twelve to fifteen years of age.⁵³ Based on the available information, which is sketchy, it appears that de Oliveira was a psychotic shooter.

He was adopted and had a difficult life, reportedly suffering from psychological problems for years.⁵⁴ His birth mother reportedly was schizophrenic, and his history of mental health issues “point to him being a schizophrenic.”⁵⁵

His adoptive siblings said, “He was very alone, absent, closed up”⁵⁶ and that he never had friends.⁵⁷ A former teacher described him as a quiet, shy boy who was harassed by his peers.⁵⁸ His condition apparently deteriorated in the last year of his life. Eight months before the attack his mother died; after this, he left home and withdrew even more. Around this time he also was fired from his job as a messenger. Shortly before the attack his appearance and behavior changed; he became disheveled and was heard to say strange things.⁵⁹

De Oliveira left behind videos and writings that reportedly reveal “an angry, delusional character whose rambling messages parallel in part those left by the Virginia Tech student who killed 32 people [Seung Hui Cho].”⁶⁰ De Oliveira was inspired by Cho, whom he referred to as “a brother.” Like Cho, de Oliveira framed his attack within an ideology that justified his violence. He said, “Our fight is against cruel, cowardly people who take advantage of the kindness, the innocence, the weakness of people who are incapable of defending themselves.”⁶¹ As with Cho, however, there was no connection between his ideology and his actions. Instead of acting on behalf of the weak and the innocent, he murdered them.

De Oliveira left a letter or suicide note that contains odd content:

You should first know that the impure cannot touch me without gloves, only the chaste or those who lost their chastity after marriage and were not involved in adultery can touch me without gloves, or, in other words, no fornicator or adulterer can have direct contact with me, nor anything that is impure can touch my blood, nothing impure can have direct contact with a virgin without his permission.⁶²

Not only is his writing rambling, but his concern about who can touch him after he’s committed mass murder is bizarre. His preoccupation with sexual purity is reminiscent of Alvaro Castillo’s obsession with lust, sin, and sexuality, as well as Seung Hui Cho’s ranting about hedonists. One of the students who survived the attack said that de Oliveira singled out girls for killing.⁶³ In fact, ten of the twelve fatalities were girls. Perhaps his focus on killing girls was related to his bizarre ideas about sexual purity.

De Oliveira presented with several indications of schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder: severely impaired social functioning, poor grooming, strange statements, bizarre preoccupations, and a grandiose sense of himself as the defender

of the weak even as he murdered them, indicating a lack of connection to the reality of who he was and what he was doing.

DISCUSSION

Comparing the nine shooters presented here to the twenty-one shooters placed within the typology in my other works, certain themes are worth noting in each of the three types.

Among the psychopathic shooters, there is often a family history of a parent in the military and/or firearms having a prominent place in the family's life (Robert Poulin, Eric Harris, Wayne Lo, Andrew Golden, and perhaps Brenda Spencer). This was true of Kretschmer. His father owned at least fifteen guns and had a shooting range in the basement. Steinhäuser was a gun enthusiast who belonged to two gun clubs, but it is not known if his parents were gun enthusiasts.

The families of psychopathic shooters used their guns legally, unlike the families of traumatized shooters, in which there is often a history of illegal firearm use. Five previously identified traumatized shooters had older male family members (father, stepfather, brother) who engaged in the misuse of guns. These include Evan Ramsey, Jeffrey Weise, Mitchell Johnson, Jamie Rouse, and Asa Coon. It is not known if the traumatized shooters identified in this article fit this pattern.

There are, however, factors among the traumatized shooters presented here which are consistent with other traumatized shooters. For example, though physical and sexual abuse occur in all kinds of families and at all levels of society, the traumatized school shooters typically come from broken homes at the lower end of the economic spectrum. This trend was seen among the traumatized shooters identified here, though with some variation. Jamie Rouse and Scott Pennington, for example, came from low-income families, but their parents had intact marriages. Conversely, Houston and Hoffman came from broken families, but it is not clear where they were on the economic spectrum. Additionally, there is often parental substance abuse in the families of traumatized shooters, and this was true for Rouse, Pennington, and Hoffman.

Another trend among the traumatized shooters is that in addition to their histories of abuse, they often experience a series of stresses shortly before their attacks. This was generally true of Houston, Pennington, Rouse, Hoffman, and Hainstock. These stresses included job loss, job stress, increasing substance use, breaking up with a girlfriend, recent relocation, impending relocation, assaults or significant harassment, legal involvement, disciplinary issues, and rejection by the military.

Among the psychotic shooters, both Castillo and de Oliveira created ideological justifications for their attacks. This is similar to other psychotic shooters including Marc Lépine, Seung Hui Cho, and Pekka-Eric Auvinen. Also, like many other psychotic shooters, they were influenced by previous shooters. Castillo was obsessed with Columbine and committed his attack on the birthday of Kip Kinkel (another psychotic school shooter). De Oliveira referred to Seung Hui Cho's attack at Virginia Tech as part of his inspiration. Whereas the traumatized and psychopathic shooters generally act without role models or ideology, psychotic shooters often create ideologies and use other shooters as role models or inspiration.

Adding the nine shooters presented here to the typology confirms some trends iden-

tified previously and provides new information to be considered. As noted previously, the categorizing of these shooters is based on the available information. In some cases, this is minimal and the assessments of the shooters are very tentative. As more information is brought to light, the categorization of the shooters may need to be changed.

NOTES

- 1 The primary work on the typology is my book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (2009 Palgrave Macmillan). This information is presented in condensed form in “Rampage School Shooters: A Typology,” an article that was first published in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* and is also available at *School Shooters.info*. Additional articles available on the same website expand the typology. These include “Expanding the Sample: Five School Shooters,” “Adult School Shooters,” and “Two Finnish School Shooters.” A forthcoming book chapter provides a variety of analyses related to the typology: “Thirty-Five School Shooters: Trends, Patterns, and Typology.” In *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies and Concepts for Prevention*, edited by Nils Bockler, Thorsten Seeger, Wilhelm Heitmeyer, and Peter Sitzler.
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