

Elliot Rodger: A Personality Analysis

Peter Langman, Ph.D.

Elliot Rodger was neither floridly psychotic nor flagrantly psychopathic. He exhibited, however, both psychotic and psychopathic features. This analysis relies primarily on his document, "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger," an autobiographical statement of great value for the light it sheds on his personality dynamics. Though Rodger was at times blind to his own dynamics, he was often painfully self-aware and articulated his thoughts and feelings with great clarity. This is not only relevant for understanding his motivations for violence, but also provides potential insight into the minds of other shooters.

FROM AVOIDANT TO SCHIZOTYPAL

Several school shooters appear to have had features of avoidant personality disorder. This is characterized by severe shyness and social anxiety, inhibition, and lack of confidence. As they moved through adolescence or young adulthood, they lost touch with reality. This progression suggests what Dr. Theodore Millon describes as the development of schizotypal personality disorder out of a pre-existing avoidant personality disorder. This development appears to have occurred with Marc Lépine, Luke Woodham, Dylan Klebold, and Pekka-Eric Auvinen, as well as Elliot Rodger.

Rodger, like these other shooters, was severely socially impaired throughout his life. As he put it, "I always suffered from shyness and social anxiety."¹ His was not ordinary shyness, however. A family friend said, "He was a boy that was unbearably removed. He hardly joined in conversation, and when he replied to something, he looked startled. I thought he was the loneliest person I had ever seen in my life."²

Even in college, Rodger was profoundly anxious and inhibited:

I disliked the teacher because he had the tendency to randomly call on me to answer questions. I was still terrified of speaking in front of the class, even if it was for one sentence. My social anxiety has always made my life so difficult, and no one ever understood it. I hated how everyone else seemed to have no anxiety at all. I was like a cripple compared to them.³

Millon noted that schizotypals often withdraw from the real world and create fantasy worlds in which they are exalted beings. This apparently is their defense against their overwhelming distress and sense of inferiority in dealing with a world in which

ELLIOT RODGER

Date: **23 May 2014**
School: **University of California, Santa Barbara**
Location: **Isla Vista, CA**
Age: **22**
Killed: **6**
Wounded: **13**
Outcome: **Suicide**
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**
Psychological type: **Psychotic / psychopathic**
Attack type: **Mixed** (targeted roommates; targeted women in a specific sorority; attacked random strangers)

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

they cannot function. Rodger, who wrote repeatedly about his feelings of inferiority, came to view himself as superior to all of humanity. The following passage demonstrates this dynamic:

I am not part of the human race. Humanity has rejected me. The females of the human species have never wanted to mate with me, so how could I possibly consider myself part of humanity? Humanity has never accepted me among them, and now I know why. I am more than human. I am superior to them all. I am Elliot Rodger ... Magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent ... Divine! I am the closest thing there is to a living god.⁴

Rodger not only referred to himself repeatedly as a god, but wrote as if he had the power to transform life on earth:

Women's rejection of me is a declaration of war, and if it's war they want, then war they shall have. It will be a war that will result in their complete and utter annihilation. I will deliver a blow to my enemies that will be so cataclysmic it will redefine the very essence of human nature.⁵

He came to view sex as the source of misery and wrote about doing away with sexuality by virtually eliminating females from the planet:

In order to completely abolish sex, women themselves would have to be abolished. All women must be quarantined like the plague they are, so that they can be used in a manner that actually benefits a civilized society. In order carry this out, there must exist a new and powerful type of government, under the control of one divine ruler, such as myself ... The first strike against women will be to quarantine all of them in concentration camps. At these camps, the vast majority of the female population will be deliberately starved to death ... A few women would be spared, however, for the sake of reproduction. These women would be kept and bred in secret labs. There, they will be artificially inseminated with sperm samples in order to produce offspring. Their depraved nature will slowly be bred out of them in time. Future generations of men would be oblivious to these remaining women's existence, and that is for the best. If a man grows up without knowing of the existence of women, there will be no desire for sex. Sexuality will completely cease to exist. Love will cease to exist.⁶

This passage contains a grandiose view of himself, as well as a bizarre, misogynistic ideology about purifying the world by eliminating women, love, and sex. Not only was Rodger out of touch with reality in terms of his own identity, but as is common among schizotypals, he had strange ideas and beliefs.

Rodger also had a tenuous connection to reality when it came to the lottery. Here are some of his comments:

I believed that it was destiny for me to win the Megamillions Lottery, particularly this very jackpot. People win the

lottery every single month, so why not me? I was meant to live a life of significance and extravagance. I was meant to win this jackpot. It was destiny ... This was the highest lottery jackpot in history. I knew I was always destined for great things. This must be it! I was destined to be the winner of the highest lottery jackpot in existence. I knew right then and there that this jackpot was meant for me. Who else deserved such a victory? I had been through so much rejection, suffering, and injustice in my life, and this was to be my salvation.⁷

He spent thousands of dollars on lottery tickets, seemingly convinced that he would win. This seems more like what is called "magical thinking" than a full-blown delusion, but nonetheless, it indicates how easily he slipped into believing his fantasies.

Rodger also had paranoid thoughts. In his mind, women deliberately denied him their love and their bodies. He felt like a victim of their "cruelty," asking, "Why do women behave like vicious, stupid, cruel animals who take delight in my suffering?"⁸ He believed that women found pleasure in denying him what he wanted. In reality, they didn't know he existed. In his mind, however, they deliberately withheld themselves from him and deliberately kept their reasons for doing so a secret: "They won't even deign to tell my why they've mistreated me. This just shows how evil and sadistic they are."⁹

Rodger's thinking was odd in another way. After writing about his intention to drive an SUV into pedestrians, he believed that they would be aware of who he was and why he attacked them: "When they are writhing in pain, their bodies broken and dying after I splatter them, they will fully realize their crimes." He thought that innocent victims of his violence would somehow magically know that they were being killed because of their "crime" of being popular and sexually active, as well as the crime committed by females of not having sex with him. In reality, his victims had no idea who he was and why he was attacking them.

PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS

Like Rodger, Dylan Klebold agonized over his inability to get a girlfriend. In contrast to Rodger, however, Klebold (who was not psychopathic) realized that this was due to his own shyness — he didn't blame women for rejecting him or other kids for not liking him. In writing about his problems, he identified the following:

What's bad — no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though I want to be accepted, me doing badly & being intimidated in any and all sports, me looking weird & acting shy — BIG problem.¹⁰

This is a strikingly different attitude than Rodger's, and this is where the issue of psychopathy appears. Klebold took

responsibility for his social failures; Rodger did not. He seemed incapable of recognizing that his behavior had anything to do with not having a girlfriend. He wrote about driving a BMW and wearing Armani and being convinced of how wonderful he was:

*I was a superior gentleman. That was what I was born to be, and it was now time to show it to the world. It was a bright, sunny day as I ascended the familiar steps up to the beautiful college campus of SBCC [Santa Barbara City College]. I immediately went to the restroom to look at myself in the mirror a few times, just so that I can feel more assured of myself. Yes, I thought. I am the image of beauty and supremacy.*¹¹

He was absolutely baffled that looking good in expensive clothes was not sufficient for women to throw themselves at him. When they didn't, he interpreted this as demonstrating how defective the brains of women are:

Females truly have something mentally wrong with them. Their minds are flawed, and at this point in my life I was beginning to see it. The more I explored my college town of Isla Vista, the more ridiculousness I witnessed. All of the hot, beautiful girls walked around with obnoxious, tough jock-type men who partied all the time and acted crazy. They should be going for intelligent gentlemen such as myself. Women are sexually attracted to the wrong type of man. This is a major flaw in the very foundation of humanity. It is completely and utterly *wrong*, in every sense of the word. As these truths fully dawned on me, I became deeply disturbed by them. Deeply disturbed, offended, and traumatized.¹²

Rodger simply could not accept that his personal shortcomings were responsible for his failures; he could only project the blame onto women. Even online when someone made the comment, "I'm not trying to be mean, but the creepy vibe that you give off in those videos is likely the major reason that you can't get girls,"¹³ Rodger apparently was unable to take this in. Inability to take responsibility for one's life is a hallmark of psychopaths. Instead, they complain of being victims of other people's mistreatment.

Rodger also exhibited narcissism in his sense of entitlement: "Those girls deserved to be dumped in boiling water for the crime of not giving me the attention and adoration I so rightfully deserve!"¹⁴ He railed repeatedly about his rejection by girls and women being an "injustice" and a "crime." When he drove by two girls at a bus stop and smiled at them and they didn't smile back, he threw his coffee at them: "*How dare those girls snub me in such a fashion! How dare they insult me so!* I raged to myself repeatedly. They deserved the punishment I gave them."¹⁵

In their book on what they termed "the criminal personality" (which they noted was akin to psychopathy), Samuel Yochelson and Stanton Samenow wrote, "The world does not give them what they think they are entitled to, so they view themselves as poorly treated and thus victims. They constantly cry 'victim'

when things do not go as they want."¹⁶

Rodger complained repeatedly that he was "a kissless virgin." He knew, however, that other young men were, too. He communicated with others online about not having a girlfriend or any sexual experience. He even talked to his friend, James, who had the same lack of success with females. James did not make a big deal about this, however, which baffled Rodger, who felt entitled to sex and was outraged when he didn't get it.

I didn't understand why James wasn't angry like me ... To see another male be successful with females is torture for males like us who have no success with females. I was so angry that I told James of all of the acts of revenge I wanted to exact on those popular boys. I told him my desire to flay them alive, to strip the skins off their flesh and make them scream in agony as punishment for living a better life than me. James became deeply disturbed by my anger. I wished that he wasn't disturbed. I wished he could be a friend that felt the same way about the world that I did. But he wasn't that kind of person. He was a weakling.¹⁷

It is interesting that Rodger saw his friend's lack of rage as weakness. Among psychopaths, "The need to exert power takes precedence over all other aims."¹⁸ This is what Rodger sought – to have power over the men and women who made him feel powerless. In contrast, James apparently accepted his situation with more patience and without any corresponding rage or blame. To Rodger, the lack of rage was weakness.

Rodger also felt entitled to a lavish lifestyle and raged against his parents for not providing this for him:

I tried to pretend as if I was part of a wealthy family. I should be. That was the life I was meant to live. *I WOULD BE!* If only my damnable mother had married into wealth instead of being selfish. If only my failure of a father had made better decisions with his directing career instead of wasting his money on that stupid documentary.¹⁹

He called his mother selfish because she did not seek out and marry a wealthy man that would have allowed Rodger to live in luxury. He wrote, "I will always resent my mother for refusing to do this ... It is very selfish of my mother to not consider this."²⁰

Rodger's entitlement was apparent in his attitude toward work:

Most of the jobs that were available to me at the time were jobs I considered to be beneath me. My mother wanted me to get a simple retail job, and the thought of myself doing that was mortifying. It would be completely against my character. I am an intellectual who is destined for greatness. I would never perform a low-class service job.²¹

Along with his entitled attitude, Rodger lacked empathy. He seemed unable to recognize that other people had feelings and needs and viewed everything through the lens of his own desires. He demonstrated no concern about hurting other people. He even thought about killing his younger half-brother, Jazz,

because he anticipated that Jazz would succeed with women. On the one hand, Rodger wrote, “My little brother really looked up to me. He was one of the few people who treated me with adoration.”²² On the other hand, Rodger realized, “He will become a popular kid who gets all the girls. Girls will love him. He will become one of my enemies. That was the day that I decided I would have to kill him on the Day of Retribution. I will not allow the boy to surpass me at everything.”²³

Beyond lacking empathy, Rodger had a sadistic streak. This showed itself above in his comment about flaying boys who were sexually active. Later, he wrote about his plans for getting vengeance on the world:

I will start luring people into my apartment, knock them out with a hammer, and slit their throats. I will torture some of the good looking people before I kill them, assuming that the good looking ones had the best sex lives. All of that pleasure they had in life, I will punish by bringing them pain and suffering. I have lived a life of pain and suffering, and it was time to bring that pain to people who actually deserve it. I will cut them, flay them, strip all the skin off their flesh, and pour boiling water all over them while they are still alive, as well as any other form of torture I could possibly think of. When they are dead, I will behead them and keep their heads in a bag.²⁴

MASOCHISM AND COLLECTING INJUSTICES

Beyond his entitlement, lack of empathy, and sadism, Rodger was also what the FBI report on school shooters labeled an “injustice collector.” This was described as follows: “The student nurses resentment over real or perceived injustices. No matter how much time has passed, the ‘injustice collector’ will not forget or forgive those wrongs or the people he or she believes are responsible.”²⁵ Rodger went through life accumulating a sense of having been wronged by women; he nursed his resentment until it drove him to murder. Such resentment appears to be a product of his narcissism – as he was quoted above, “How dare they” not give him the love and adoration he deserved.

A similar dynamic occurred with several psychotic shooters in the form of a masochistic personality. This refers to having an extreme sensitivity to emotional pain, and holding onto and exaggerating one’s suffering. Though in other writings I have used the terms “injustice collector” and “masochism” interchangeably, further reflection suggests that though similar concepts, they have a different dynamic. Psychopathic shooters rise in anger in response to what they perceive as injustice – “how dare they!” In contrast, psychotic shooters sink in anguish in response to what they perceive as cruelty – “woe is me!”

Rodger not only was an injustice collector, but was exquisitely sensitive and had a masochistic obsession with his own suffering. He wrote that while attending a summer camp at age 11, “an incident happened that would scar me for life.”²⁶

This consisted of a girl he didn’t know being rude to him. The impact of this was devastating:

It made me feel like an insignificant, unworthy little mouse. I felt so small and vulnerable. I couldn’t believe that this girl was so horrible to me, and I thought that it was because she *viewed me* as a loser. That was the first experience of female cruelty I endured, and it traumatized me to no end.²⁷

Other kids would have shrugged it off or perhaps been briefly bothered or upset. For Rodger, it seemed like a life-defining event.

ENVY AND RESENTMENT

Rodger’s personality was notable for the intensity of his envy and resentment. Like masochism and injustice collecting, envy and resentment are similar concepts but they perhaps can be differentiated between psychotic and psychopathic shooters. To make this point, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold will serve as examples. Both were aware of hierarchies of status, but they had different responses for different reasons. Harris, a psychopathic shooter, looked down on people and resented those who had status in the eyes of the world because he thought he deserved to have the highest status. Klebold, a psychotic shooter, looked up to people and envied those who had status. In other words, psychotic shooters recognized that their peers were above them; this resulted in envy. Psychopathic shooters, however, refused to acknowledge that anyone was above them; this resulted in resentment toward those who thought they had, or were seen by others as having, higher status.

Rodger appears to have had both dynamics. On one hand, he was painfully aware that other males were sexually successful; he envied them profoundly and felt devastatingly inferior. He wrote about his early awareness of sex at age 14: “I felt depressed because I wanted sex, yet I felt unworthy of it.”²⁸ He also, however, seemed to actually believe he was somehow superior to other males and resented their success. He was both full of anguish at his inferiority and full of rage at the violation of his sense of superiority.

For example, when he heard from his roommates that they had lost their virginity long ago, “I felt so inferior, as it reminded me of how much I have missed out in life.”²⁹ Thus, he envied them for the success they had that he did not, and accordingly he felt inferior. He also wrote, however, about his superiority:

How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. *He* is descended from slaves. I deserve it more. I tried not to believe his foul words, but they were already said, and it was hard to erase from my mind. If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl at the age of thirteen while I’ve had to suffer virginity all my life, then

this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject ME? The injustice!³⁰

J. Reid Meloy, in his book *The Psychopathic Mind*, notes that for psychopaths, “perception of others’ pleasure arouses only envy.”³¹ Seeing others experiencing pleasure not only causes envy, however, but rage. After all, psychopaths see themselves as superior; for others to experience pleasures that they do not threatens their view of themselves. Meloy explains this as follows: “Psychopathic anger is . . . contaminated by an attitude of righteous indignation that betrays the felt ‘specialness’ and entitlement of the grandiose self.”³²

The above passage of Rodger’s is also notable for his combined racism and classism, clinging to his family’s aristocratic past and his identity as “half white” to bolster his sense of specialness. As a child, he had “the feeling that I was different because I am of mixed race. I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with.”³³ Not only was he trying to fit in with white kids, but he was obsessed with white girls, specifically those who were blonde. It seems he sought affirmation of his worth by being accepted by those he idealized as the whitest of the white.

DESTROYING WHAT HE MOST WANTED

Another concept is relevant to understanding Rodger’s violence. Nancy McWilliams writes about “primitive envy” among psychopaths, which is “the wish to destroy that which one most desires.”³⁴ This sheds light on Rodger’s drive to kill women. As he expressed it:

I would take great pleasure and satisfaction in condemning every single woman on earth to starve to death. I would have an enormous tower built just for myself, where I can oversee the entire concentration camp and gleefully watch them all die. *If I can’t have them, no one will*, I’d imagine thinking to myself as I oversee this. Women represent everything that is unfair with this world, and in order to make the world a fair place, they must all be eradicated . . . This whole viewpoint and ideology of abolishing sex stems from being deprived of it all my life. If I cannot have it, I will do everything I can to *DESTROY IT*.³⁵

He wanted to eliminate the things he most wanted – women and sex.

Rodger also wanted to eliminate the males who succeeded where he failed: “The males deserve to be punished for living a better and more pleasurable life than me.”³⁶ Both men and women represented his failure as a male, and both had to be destroyed. This dynamic is described by Theodore Millon, who noted that in order to overcome a sense of weakness, some psychopathic personalities:

have learned that they can feel superior by overwhelming others by the force of their physical power and brutal vindictiveness. ‘I am superior to you’ . . . Once unleashed, the power of vindication draws on deep fantasies of cruel and unmitigated revenge . . . The subjugation or elimination of others has become the primary goal.³⁷

DAMAGED MASCULINITY

Rodger’s sense of failed masculinity predated puberty and his subsequent sexual frustration. Like many other school shooters, Rodger was not a good physical specimen (see my forthcoming book³⁸). He was short, weak, and unathletic. His awareness of these deficits hit him in fourth grade:

The first frustration of the year, which would remain for the rest of my life, was the fact that I was very short for my age. As Fourth Grade started, it fully dawned on me that I was the shortest kid in my class – even the girls were taller than me. In the past, I rarely gave a thought to it, but at this stage I became extremely annoyed at how everyone was taller than me, and how the tallest boys were automatically respected more. It instilled the first feelings of inferiority in me, and such feelings would only grow more volatile with time.³⁹

He somehow got the idea that playing basketball would make him taller, so he took up the sport. Beyond simply playing basketball, he wrote: “I also remember lying on the ground in the basketball court trying to stretch my body as much as I could in between basketball sessions.”⁴⁰

Playing basketball not only did not make him taller, but made him realize his physical limitations:

When I played basketball at school, some boys would join me, and when they did I saw that they were much better at the sport than me. I envied their ability to throw the ball at double the distance than I could. This made me realize that along with being short, I was physically weak compared to other boys my age. Even boys younger than me were stronger. This vexed me to no end.⁴¹

SIBLING RIVALRY

Like many psychotic shooters, Rodger suffered significant sibling rivalry. When he found out that his sister, who was four years younger than he was, had a boyfriend and was sexually active, he was devastated, commenting, “It reminded me of how pathetic I was.”⁴² He also compared himself to his half-brother, Jazz:

While I was shy, short, and physically weak; Jazz was tall for his age and very social. He had no problem going up to

other boys at the playground and making instant friends. I began to form a bitter envy towards him.⁴³

As noted above, Rodger foresaw that Jazz would be successful with women, and he could not endure this thought: “If I can’t live a pleasurable life, then neither will he! I will not let him put my legacy to shame.”⁴⁴ In other words, he felt he had to kill him (though he actually made no attempt to do so).

CONCLUSION

Elliot Rodger was complicated. He had traits of both psychotic and psychopathic shooters. He was masochistic and an injustice collector. He both envied and resented his peers, alternately feeling inferior and superior to them. He had a damaged sense of masculinity due to his short stature, physical weakness, and lack of athletic abilities. He apparently struggled with being biracial; he was also enraged at the thought that his siblings surpassed him. All these issues came together in an act of violence.

One other feature is noteworthy. Rodger put videos on YouTube in which he bemoaned his failure with women. Rather than being embarrassed by being “a kissless virgin” and keeping this to himself, he broadcast it to the world. He apparently wanted attention, even it was attention for being a failure. A passage he wrote about himself in middle school is revealing:

I was extremely unpopular, widely disliked, and viewed as the weirdest kid in the school. I had to act weird in order to gain attention. I was tired of being the invisible shy kid. Infamy is better than total obscurity.⁴⁵

NOTES

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- 2 “Family Friend Says Elliot Rodger’s Parents ‘Crippled With Grief,’” *ABC News*, May 29, 2014.
- 3 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 72.
- 4 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 135.
- 5 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 131.
- 6 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 136.
- 7 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 104.
- 8 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 117.
- 9 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 133.
- 10 “Dylan Klebold’s Journal and Other Writings,” Transcribed and annotated by Peter Langman, Ph.D., p. 3. Available on www.schoolshooters.info.

- shooters.info.
- 11 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 99.
- 12 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 84.
- 13 Hill, Kashmir, “The Disturbing Internet Footprint of Santa Barbara Shooter Elliot Rodger,” *Forbes*, 24 May 2014.
- 14 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 100.
- 15 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 100.
- 16 Yochelson, Samuel, and Samenow, Stanton. *The Criminal Personality: Volume 1: A Profile for Change*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1976, p. 366.
- 17 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 91.
- 18 McWilliams, Nancy. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process* (second edition). New York: Guilford, 2011, p. 160.
- 19 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 102.
- 20 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 120.
- 21 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 67.
- 22 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 116.
- 23 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 127.
- 24 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 132.
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- 28 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 47.
- 29 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 84.
- 30 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 84.
- 31 Meloy, J. Reid. *The Psychopathic Mind: Origins, Dynamics, and Treatment*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992, p. 76.
- 32 Meloy, *Psychopathic Mind*, p. 82.
- 33 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 17.
- 34 McWilliams, Nancy. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality Structure in the Clinical Process* (second edition). New York: Guilford, 2011, p. 165.
- 35 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” pp. 136-137.
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- 37 Millon, Theodore. *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV and Beyond* (second edition). New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996, p. 490.
- 38 Langman, Peter. *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- 39 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 15.
- 40 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 16.
- 41 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 16.
- 42 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 129.
- 43 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 116.
- 44 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 128.
- 45 Rodger, “My Twisted World,” p. 42.