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# Different Types of Role Model Influence and Fame Seeking Among Mass Killers and Copycat Offenders

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*Contagion and copycat behavior among mass killers is often discussed in the media when there are multiple attacks within a short span of time. Proximity in time, however, does not necessarily mean that one attack inspired another. This study examines the clearest cases of role-modeling and fame-seeking among mass killers in which the perpetrators personally acknowledged these types of influence and motivation in their own lives. Instead of simply categorizing potential copycat offenders in a “yes”/“no” binary fashion, it outlines many different types of influence, imitation, and inspiration and then provides evidence on perpetrators who represent examples of each type. Overall, findings suggest that most killers were not gaining insights into attack methodology from their role models, but rather were drawn to the prior perpetrators for a variety of personal reasons. Looking ahead, because of the frequency of mass killers citing previous perpetrators as role models or sources of inspiration, it is critical that media outlets give careful consideration to how they cover such incidents.*

KEYWORDS *school shooters, mass killers, copycat offenders, role models, fame seeking*

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of contagion or copycat behavior among mass killers is often discussed in the media when there are multiple attacks within a short span of time. Proximity in time, however, does not necessarily mean that one attack inspired another. This article presents direct evidence of previous perpetrators serving as role models or inspiration for subsequent perpetrators.

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Beyond simply documenting this influence, however, the article seeks to demonstrate the many variations of role modeling, imitation, and inspiration. Most studies of mass shooting contagion and copycat effects have focused on establishing whether or not previous attackers influenced subsequent attackers, in what is essentially a binary fashion (Kissner, 2016; Lankford & Tomek, 2017; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). This is an important first step, and potential copycat cases could certainly be categorized as simply a “yes” if there was evidence of direct influence from a previous attacker, or “no” if there was no such evidence. Beyond this, some researchers have looked closer and noted that different copycat offenders may reference, study, and/or imitate previous offenders (Follman & Andrews, 2015; Larkin, 2009). However, the many nuances of these types of influence and how they may have contributed to the perpetrators’ motivations for violence have not been sufficiently explored.

There are two related aspects of this phenomenon. One is the extent that later attacks are inspired by previous attacks. The other is the extent to which killers are motivated by the desire for fame. These two factors intersect because one of the frequently cited reasons for imitating a previous attacker is to receive the same recognition that that perpetrator received. This article will explore different aspects and manifestations of imitation and inspiration, as well as review evidence of the attacks being motivated at least partly by the desire for fame.

From the outset, it needs to be stated that previous attacks do not cause subsequent attacks in a simplistic sense; the vast majority of people would never commit a mass killing, regardless of the circumstances. There are many factors that contribute to acts of mass violence, including psychological issues, social setbacks, adversity or crises, and the impact of body-related concerns (Langman, 2009; 2015; Newman, Fox, Roth, Mehta & Harding, 2004; Vossekuil, Fern, Reddy, Borum & Modzeleski, 2002).

Nonetheless, many shooters cite previous attackers as role models or influences. Though this article addresses role models who themselves committed shootings in the not too distant past, these are not the only types of role models found among mass shooters. Another category consists of historical figures such as Hitler and Napoleon (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017a), and a third category includes fictional figures. For example, the book *Rage* and the film *Natural Born Killers* have been cited as influences by multiple attackers (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017b).

#### METHOD

This study examined the most straightforward and unambiguous cases of role-modeling and fame-seeking among mass killers, in which the perpetrators personally acknowledged these types of influence and motivation in their own lives. The evidence presented consists of oral and written statements by the perpetrators themselves, including comments made both before and after their attacks, as well as evidence from their computers and other materials found during post-attack investigations.

As other researchers have noted, limiting a study to this type of direct evidence from the perpetrators themselves creates a very high standard (Lankford, 2016). The benefit is that what a perpetrator said or wrote is an objective fact and part of the historical record, much like other elements of these perpetrators’ behavior, such as target selec-

tion or weapon choice. In other words, this study presents many direct quotes from the perpetrators that essentially allows them to speak for themselves. At the same time, not all mass killers are known to have made such statements, even if they may have shared similar influences or motives, so the cost of maintaining such a high standard of evidence is the inevitable lack of fully comprehensive coverage. This article will not present every known or suspected case of role modeling or fame seeking behavior, because there are many offenders whose influences and motives remain a matter of speculation. Instead, it will focus on identifying a variety of types of influence, imitation, and inspiration and then providing direct evidence on perpetrators who represent examples of each type.

Though the focus of this study is primarily on school shooters, occasional reference will be made to other similar types of perpetrators who attacked at other locations. Relevant cases for which direct evidence of role-modeling and fame-seeking could be found were identified primarily by examining perpetrators listed in two sources: Langman's (2015) study of 48 high school, college, and adult school shooters, and Langman's (2017a) study of 55 mass killers who were influenced by historical figures or previous attackers. A total of 32 relevant cases with accompanying evidence were found.

To provide structure, the perpetrators' behaviors and motivations have been divided into categories (see Table 1 and Table 2). These categories often overlap or co-occur, which means that the same shooter could be influenced or inspired by a role model in multiple different ways. The current categorizations are based on available information, and because it cannot be assumed that our knowledge of the shooters is complete, it is possible that the shooters might belong in additional categories but failed to leave a full record of the dynamics involved in their copycat behavior. Nevertheless, these categories provide a conceptual guide for the many different ways that offenders have been influenced by previous attackers.

#### OFFENDER CURIOSITY AND RESEARCH

Many shooters not only knew about previous attackers but also conducted research on them. This frequently involved online research, such as reading media articles or consuming other types of internet news, but several shooters are also known to have read magazine articles or books on various mass murderers or serial killers.

On 20 May 1988, a woman committed a multi-pronged attack against dozens of people, including shooting several students at Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois. *People Magazine* published an article about the perpetrator and her attack on June 6, 1988. A young man in Greenwood, South Carolina, was reportedly fascinated by the magazine story, and read the article daily until he committed his own school shooting at Oakland Elementary School on September 26, 1988. After he was captured, he said, "I could understand where she was coming from. I think I may have copied her" (Langman, 2015, p. 148). The Oakland Elementary shooter was also reading a book about a serial killer the night before his attack.

Separately, at least two shooters are known to have owned the book *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*: one who attacked at Arapahoe High School in Colorado in 2013, and another who attacked in Munich, Germany in 2016. The Arapahoe shooter also had the book *Columbine: A True Crime Story*, and he even made a Power-

TABLE 1 *Examples of Role Model Influence on Subsequent Attackers*

Result of influence	Subtype (if applicable)	Examples
Offender curiosity/research		1998 Oakland Elementary School shooter 2006 Pine Middle School shooter 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter 2013 Arapahoe High School shooter 2016 Munich mall area shooter
Perceived personal connection	Heroic idolization	2014 FedEx shooter 2014 Seattle Pacific University shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
	God-like worship	2006 Dawson College shooter 2006 Emsdetten school shooter 2007 Virginia Tech shooter 2014 Franklin Regional High School stabber
	Personal similarities	2006 Emsdetten school shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
	Infatuation	2006 Orange High School shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
Imitation	Casual references and quick imitation	1966 Sweetwater shooter 1998 Parker Middle School shooter 1998 Thurston High School shooter 1999 W.R. Myers High School shooter 1999 Heritage High School shooter
	Imitating/honoring dates	1999 Heritage High School shooter 2006 Orange High School shooter 2014 Franklin Regional High School stabber 2016 Munich mall area shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
	Pilgrimages	2006 Orange High School shooter 2008 Kauhajoki shooter 2016 Munich mall area shooter
	Imitation of language	2006 Dawson College shooter 2007 New Life Church shooter 2007 Jokela shooter 2008 Kauhajoki shooter 2013 Arapahoe High School shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter

TABLE 1 (continued)

Result of influence	Subtype (if applicable)	Examples
Imitation ( <i>continued</i> )	Imitation of appearance and behavior	2006 Orange High School shooter 2008 Kauhajoki shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
Inspiration	General inspiration	1989 École Polytechnique shooter 2012 Perry Hall High School shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
	Sympathy with a cause	1999 Heritage High School shooter 2007 Virginia Tech shooter 2007 Jokela shooter 2011 Brazilian shooter 2014 Franklin Regional High School stabber
	Carrying out the will of others	2014 Franklin Regional High School stabber 2014 Seattle Pacific University shooter

Point presentation about the book (Langman, 2017*a*). In addition, at least five other school shooters have written essays on school shootings as part of their coursework (Langman, 2017*b*).

The most extreme example of research appears to be the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School killer. He created a massive spreadsheet containing minute details on 500 killers. He also edited Wikipedia entries on various killers, typically adding details regarding the firearms they used (Lysiak, 2013). His primary interest appeared to be in Columbine; his computer contained “hundreds of documents, images, [and] videos pertaining to the Columbine H.S. massacre including what appears to be a complete copy of the investigation” (Sedensky, 2013, p. A217).

In some cases, perpetrators have admitted a direct connection between their research and inspiration to commit these crimes. For example, the Pine Middle School Shooter who attacked in Reno, Nevada in 2006 reportedly “researched Columbine and other school shootings online, and read copies of diaries and journals” of the Columbine killers. He also told the police that Columbine “kind of inspired me. If they could do it, I thought I could do it” (Langman, 2017*a*).

#### PERCEIVED PERSONAL CONNECTION TO PREVIOUS ATTACKERS

##### *Heroic Idolization*

There have been several cases of shooters who identified previous killers as their heroes or idols. For example, the perpetrator of the attack at Seattle Pacific University on June 5, 2014, wrote the following:

TABLE 2 *Examples of Attackers Seeking Fame and Wanting to Inspire Others*

Result of influence	Examples
Seeking fame	1966 University of Texas shooter 1966 Rose-Mar College of Beauty shooter 1979 Cleveland Elementary School shooter 1992 Simon's Rock College shooter 1997 Bethel High School shooter 1999 Columbine High School shooters 1999 Heritage High School shooter 2002 Erfurt shooter 2006 Emsdetten shooter 2007 Virginia Tech shooter 2007 Jokela shooter 2014 FedEx shooter 2014 Franklin Regional High School stabber 2014 Umpqua Community College shooter 2017 Weis Market shooter
Inspiring others, leading the revolution	1999 Columbine High School shooter 2006 Emsdetten shooter 2007 Virginia Tech shooter 2007 Jokela shooter

This is it! I can't believe I'm really doing this! So exciting I'm jumpy. Since Virginia Tech and Columbine, I've been thinking about those a lot. I used to feel bad for the ones who were killed, but now [Columbine killer name redacted] and [Virginia Tech killer name redacted] became my Idols. And they guided me til [*sic*] today. (Langman, 2017a)

Similarly, a young man who considered committing a school shooting but who instead attacked the FedEx facility where he worked in 2014 wrote "I've found that [names of Columbine killers redacted] are some of my heroes ... So I'm going to go out guns blazing" (Langman, 2017a).

More recently, a man who killed three people at a Weis Market in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, on 8 June 2017, wrote repeatedly about the Columbine killers and other previous attackers. He was so obsessed that he even had numerous Columbine-related dreams ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 187). Just over a week before the attack, he wrote, "As of right now ... Weis Markets is officially Columbine High School" ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 228). In one of his last entries he wrote about dead people he'd like to meet, and specifically named the Columbine killers as well as the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Sandy Hook massacre ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 229).

### *God-Like Worship*

Several shooters were so obsessed or fascinated by the two Columbine killers that they elevated them to special god-like status. The Virginia Tech killer referred to the Columbine perpetrators as “martyrs,” giving their massacre a religious connotation, as if they had died for a greater good. Similarly, the Dawson College shooter referred to the Columbine killers as “Modern day saints” (Langman, 2017a).

Going beyond this, a German youth who committed a school shooting on November 20, 2006 in Emsdetten, wrote of one of the Columbine killers, “[name redacted] IS GOD! There is no doubt” (“S.B.’s Journal,” 2006, p.2).

This German shooter was not the only one to view the Columbine killer as a god. A teenager who committed a mass stabbing at Franklin Regional High School in Murrysville, Pennsylvania, wrote “I became a prophet because I spread the word of a God” and named one of the Columbine killers as the god whom he was referring to. He elaborated on this idea, commenting, “If [name redacted] is a god, like the Buddha, then that makes me Siddhartha, a wandering student of many that can only find himself when he meets a god almost no one takes seriously.” The perpetrator attributed his act of violence to the impact of Columbine: “I would be nothing and this whole event would never occur if it weren’t for [redacted] and [redacted] of Columbine High School” (“A.H.’s Letter,” 2014, pp. 1, 2, 4).

### *Personal Similarities*

Some perpetrators have perceived a remarkable similarity between a prior killer and themselves. For example, the Emsdetten shooter wrote of one of the Columbine killers, “It is scary how similar [name redacted] was to me. Sometimes it seems as if I were to live his life again, as if everything would repeat itself” (“S.B.’s Journal,” 2006, pp. 2-3).

The shooter who attacked a Weis Market in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, had a similar view of the same Columbine killer. He wrote, “I think we would have connected on so many levels.” He added, “It’s very surreal how similar [name redacted]’s journal is to my mental journal (my thoughts) ... This dude is a fucking hero to me” (“R.S.’s Journal,” 2017, p. 12). He also addressed the Columbine killer in the following comments: “Thank you so fucking much for getting me into guns! When I’m dead I wanna shoot with you, dude. Let’s make it happen!” (p. 83).

### *Infatuation*

Beyond identifying with a perpetrator, at least two school shooters have expressed intense feelings that seem like infatuation for one of the Columbine killers. The Orange High School shooter wrote, “[Columbine killer] is just so good-looking. I can’t believe he couldn’t get a date for the prom. If I was a girl, I would have gone to the prom with him. Does that sound gay, straight or bi[sexual]?” (Langman, 2015, pp. 45-46). A psychiatrist who evaluated this shooter reported that his homosexual feelings for the Columbine perpetrator caused him distress (“Accused Shooter’s Journal,” 2009).

The Tunkhannock shooter expressed love for this same Columbine killer several times in his journal. For example, he wrote, “I love you, [name redacted], you da man!”

In one case, he felt compelled to note that this was not homosexual love: “[Columbine killer], no homo, but I fucking love you” (“R.S.’s Journal,” 2017, pp. 149, 83). Because this perpetrator wrote extensively about being a girl trapped in a boy’s body, the nature of this infatuation remains unclear.

#### IMITATION OF PREVIOUS ATTACKERS

##### *Casual References and Quick Imitation*

A number of shooters were apparently impressed by a specific attack and committed their own attacks shortly thereafter. This seems like the most basic form of influence. Unlike many other cases cited in this article, these perpetrators did not conduct in-depth research or engage in significant planning. They appear to have engaged more in simple imitation rather than significant idolization of previous shooters.

For example, just three days after the Texas Tower massacre on August 1, 1966, and 3 weeks after the mass murder of nurses in Chicago, a 15-year-old boy in Sweetwater, Texas, was arrested after he shot and killed somebody. The boy commented, “I’ve been thinking about why I did it. I wanted to have fun like the guys in Chicago and Austin who had fun killing people.” (Lavergne, 1997, p. 259).

On March 24, 1998, there was an attack at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Shortly after this, a young man at Parker Middle School in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, was heard commenting that “he was going to do something like that someday,” as well as, “That Jonesboro thing, that would be like me bringing a gun to the dinner dance” (DeJong, Epstein & Hart, 2003, p. 82). One month later, on April 24, the student in fact took a gun to the school dinner dance and opened fire. Separately, a student at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, also watched the news coverage of the Jonesboro attack and told classmates that it was “cool,” adding that, “somebody should do that around here” (Lieberman, 2008, p. 67). On May 21, 1998, he committed a school shooting as well.

There were two similar incidents in the wake of the attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999. Eight days after Columbine, a student at W.R. Myers High School in Taber, Canada, committed his own attack. He had been heard alluding to “the Littleton Massacre” (Langman, 2017a). Similarly, a month after the Columbine shooting, a student at Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia shot several students. He had been talking about Columbine, including “saying how cool it was” (Sullivan & Guerette, 2003, p. 51). He also said, “I should do something like that.” In a statement after the attack, he said, “I had just gotten the idea from the shooting at Columbine High School on 20 April. So the Monday of the 20 May shooting, I decided to open fire 20 May, one month after the Colorado shooting” (Sullivan & Guerette, 2003, p. 51).

All five of these perpetrators committed their attacks within 2 months of the incidents they cited, and two of them were exactly 1 month later. One of these two perpetrators stated that this specific timing was planned; the other one’s timing may have been planned or coincidental. The extremely young ages of these perpetrators is worth noting: three were 14 years old and two were 15 years, which is younger than most mass shooters (Langman, 2015).

### *Imitating/Honoring Dates*

In addition to the aforementioned shooter at W.R. Myers High School who attacked exactly 1 month after Columbine, a number of other shooters have expressed their desire to imitate previous attackers or honor the dates of their attack. In fact, the date of the Columbine attack itself was selected by those original perpetrators because it was on Hitler's birthday (Langman, 2016a).

For example, the Orange High School shooter tried to imitate the suicide of one of the Columbine killers by killing himself on the seventh anniversary of Columbine, at the same time as the Columbine killer had shot himself; his father, however, intervened. The killer interpreted this to mean that God wanted him to commit his own attack in imitation of Columbine. He then chose the birthday of the Thurston High School killer for the day of his attack (August 30, 2006), while also noting that 2006 was the 40th anniversary of the Texas Tower massacre (Langman, 2017a).

The perpetrator of the mass stabbing in Murrysville, PA, had wanted to commit his attack on 20 April because it was the anniversary of Columbine, but the school was not going to be open that day. He chose instead to carry out his attack on 9 April because it was the birthday of one of the Columbine killers ("*Pennsylvania v. H.*, 2016," p. 5).

Similarly, although the Weis Market shooter did not attack on a Columbine anniversary, he did consider dates important and appeared to honor them. In his journal, he wished the Columbine killer happy birthday on the date of his birth, and on the anniversary of the Columbine attack wrote a tribute to this with the message in big letters, "18 YEARS OF COLUMBINE" ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 192). He also wrote, "We need another Columbine" ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 175).

In another example, the Munich killer changed his online profile photograph to that of the perpetrator of the 2011 massacre in Norway, and then committed his attack on the fifth anniversary of that attack (Langman, 2017a).

### *Pilgrimages*

Making a pilgrimage to the site of a previous attack is an extreme form of imitation; the individual actually wants to be in the same place where the role model was. This has occurred at least several times that are known. For instance, in 2006, after he had tried to kill himself on the anniversary of the Columbine attack and prior to his attack at Orange High School, an 18-year-old convinced his mother to drive him from their home in Hillsborough, North Carolina, to Littleton, Colorado. While in Littleton, the young man drove to Columbine High School, to the home of one of the Columbine killers, and to the pizza shop where the two Columbine killers had worked. While in Littleton, he bought a blank trench coat in explicit imitation of the perpetrators (Langman, 2015).

Similarly, in 2007, an 18-year-old committed a school shooting in Jokela, Finland. A year later, a young man visited Jokela and took photographs of the school where the original shooting had occurred. He also bought his guns from the same dealer who sold them to the Jokela shooter. This young man then committed an attack in Kauhajoki, Finland on September 23, 2008 (Langman, 2015).

As one other example, on July 22, 2016, a young man committed a mass attack near a shopping mall in Munich, Germany. It was subsequently discovered that he had made

a pilgrimage to the German town of Winnenden to take photographs at the scene of a previous school shooting that occurred there on March 11, 2009 (Langman, 2017a).

### *Imitation of Language*

Several shooters have also imitated the language used by previous attackers. For example, one of the Columbine shooters wrote about “natural selection” multiple times (Langman, 2014). In his view, this meant the elimination of inferior people, with virtually everyone in the world being seen as inferior. On the day of the Columbine attack, this shooter wore a shirt that read “Natural Selection.”

Similarly, the Jokela shooter titled his manifesto, “Natural Selector’s Manifesto,” and echoed the Columbine shooter’s ideology of killing off those he deemed inferior. He also wrote in the manifesto, “Hate, Im [*sic*] so full of it and I love it,” which was a paraphrase of the Columbine killer’s writing, “HATE! I’m full of hate and I love it.” A shooter at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, just a few minutes from Columbine High School, also quoted this passage, writing, “I am filled with hate, I love it” (Langman, 2017a).

The Jokela shooter also wrote, “Like some other wise people have said in the past, human race is not worth fighting for or saving ... only worth killing.” This was a reference to the Columbine killer, who wrote, “the human race isn’t worth fighting for, only worth killing” (Langman, 2017a).

A man who killed three people in a Weis Market in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania on June 8, 2017, had made three shirts with the words “Natural Selection” on them (“R.S.’s Journal,” 2017). Prior to this, in 2007, the Orange High School shooter who had made a pilgrimage to Columbine High School made a special shirt for the day of the attack: the front said “Natural Selection” and the back said, “Remember Columbine, 20 April 1999, Littleton, Colorado” (Langman, 2017a).

A killer who attacked New Life Church in Colorado in 2007 also imitated the language of the Columbine shooters. The church attacker wrote, “I’m coming for EVERYONE soon and I WILL be armed to the @#%\$ teeth and I WILL shoot to kill” (Osher, Emery & Meyer, 2007). This is almost identical to what the Columbine shooter had written: “I’m coming for EVERYONE soon, and I WILL be armed to the fucking teeth, and I will shoot to kill” (“E.H. Online,” 1999, p. 9). The church attacker also wrote, “Feel no remorse, no sense of shame, I don’t care if I live or die in the shoot-out. All I want to do is kill and injure as many of you as I can” (Osher, et al., 2007). This, too, was a repeat of the Columbine perpetrator who had written: “Feel no remorse, no sense of shame ... I don’t care if I live or die in the shootout, all I want to do is kill and injure as many of you pricks as I can” (“E.H. Online,” 1999, p. 10).

The Dawson College shooter, after referring to the Columbine killers as “Modern day saints,” also wrote “Ich bin gott” (Langman, 2017a) which is German for “I am God.” This was a phrase that one of the Columbine perpetrators wrote multiple times (Langman, 2014).

Finally, in Finland, the Jokela shooter had worn a shirt on the day of his attack that said, “Humanity is Overrated.” Less than a year later, the Kauhajoki perpetrator had also been heard saying, “humanity is overrated” in the days leading up to his attack (Langman, 2017a).

### *Imitation of Appearance and Behavior*

Some perpetrators have also imitated previous attackers' appearance and behavior. For instance, based on his obsession with the Columbine killers, the Orange High School shooter imitated both how they dressed and what they did. As mentioned earlier, he bought a black trench coat while on his pilgrimage to Littleton, and on the day of his attack he also wore a shirt that read "Natural Selection." Both of these clothing choices were attempts to copy what the Columbine killers' wore. In addition, he also named one of his guns "Arlene" because one of the Columbine killers had named a gun "Arlene," and he sawed off the barrel in direct imitation of the Columbine killer doing the same thing with his firearm. The Orange Hill shooter also wanted to kill himself with a shotgun because one of the Columbine killers had killed himself by that method. Finally, he also began to make pipe bombs because the Columbine killers had used pipe bombs as well (Langman, 2017a).

The Weis Market shooter also made a shirt like the one the perpetrator wore on the day of the Columbine attack. He wore it to work one day and later wrote, "It was as if [Columbine killer's name redacted] was with me" ("R.S.'s Journal," 2017, p. 78).

Also as noted above, in Finland the Kauhajoki shooter made a pilgrimage to the site of the Jokela shooting and imitated the Jokela shooter's language. He also apparently tried to imitate the prior shooter's image. As summarized in the official report by the Finnish Ministry of Justice:

The perpetrator's hair and dressing style had undergone a change during the summer preceding the incident. He now combed his hair back and wore a black leather jacket, which attracted attention. His new style was reminiscent of that of the Jokela school killer. (Langman, 2017a)

The Kauhajoki shooter may also have imitated the Jokela attacker in the method of his attack; he not only committed a school shooting, but just like the Jokela shooter, he also committed arson at the school as well.

### INSPIRATION

#### *General Inspiration*

In a number of cases the perpetrators cited previous killers as inspiration, though it is not clear how much research they each did into the attacks. For example, in 1989, the suicide note of the man who committed a massacre at the École Polytechnique in Montreal mentioned the perpetrator of an attack on the Canadian parliament in 1984 (Langman, 2017a). In another example, a Brazilian shooter who committed an attack in 2011 was influenced by the terrorist attack on 9/11. He became obsessed with terrorism, nicknamed himself Al Qaeda, and told people that he was Osama bin Laden. He also referred to the Virginia Tech shooter as "a brother" and viewed a previous Brazilian school shooter as a role model (Langman, 2015).

Not surprisingly, Columbine has also inspired subsequent attackers in this general way. A teenager who shot a student at Perry Hall High School (Baltimore, Maryland,

2012) listed the Columbine killers on his Facebook page as inspirations. Additionally, when the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech massacre was still in high school, he had also been fascinated by attack in Littleton and wrote a paper indicating that “he wanted to repeat Columbine” (Langman, 2017*a*). The Weis Market shooter similarly wrote in his journal, “As the late [Columbine killer’s name redacted] once said, ‘I hate the fucking world.’ What an inspiration” (“R.S.’s Journal,” 2017, p. 78).

### *Sympathy with a Cause*

Though the Columbine attack was directed at the school as a whole with no particular people or types of people being singled out as targets, the news coverage in the immediate aftermath of the attack portrayed the killers as having sought to kill “jocks” and other specific groups of students. The early news coverage also conveyed the mistaken idea that the Columbine perpetrators were part of the students who called themselves the Trenchcoat Mafia. The idea that the perpetrators were victims who were taking revenge on their tormentors was a motivation that has resonated with other shooters.

For example, the shooter at Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia, said that this kind of attack “should have happened to our school a long time ago.” He said he “could understand” how the Columbine killers would want to shoot the “jocks and preps,” and referred to his “brothers and sisters related to the trench coat mafia” (Sullivan & Guerette, 2003, p. 50). Similarly, the Virginia Tech killer framed his attack as an uprising of the oppressed against the oppressors and cited the Columbine shooters as essentially brothers in arms. In 2011, the Brazilian shooter cited the Virginia Tech killer as “a brother” in the cause of defending the innocent (Langman, 2017*a*). In another example, the boy who committed the mass stabbing in Murrysville said of the Columbine killers, “I thought since I was bullied, I came from the same crop as them ... They are my kind of people” (Hardway, 2014).

An alternate view of Columbine is that rather than being the rising up of the weak against the powerful, it was an attack by the superior against the inferior. This same concept of the superior eliminating the inferior was the central point of the manifesto of the shooter in Jokela, Finland, which was titled “Natural Selector’s Manifesto,” and also appeared relevant in some of the other cases described previously.

### *Carrying Out the Will of Others*

In a somewhat different way, two shooters also reported believing that they were directly carrying out the will of previous perpetrators. The shooter in the Seattle Pacific University incident said that he heard the voices of the Columbine and Virginia Tech killers talking to him, and specified that the voice of the Columbine killer had been “telling him to hurt people” (Langman, 2017*a*). The Murrysville perpetrator also reported that he was carrying out the will of the Columbine killers: “I thought they or someone like them wanted me to do this,” (Hardway, 2014).

*Seeking Fame*

The ability to achieve notoriety through violence is not new. In 1966, there was tremendous media attention on the crimes portrayed in the book *In Cold Blood*, as well as on the mass murder of nurses in Chicago. The biographer of the man who committed the sniper attack at the University of Texas in Austin wrote: “The power of mass murder to capture the attention of, to shock, and to break the heart of a nation could not have escaped [perpetrator’s name redacted].” (Lavergne, 1997, p. 81). Lavergne (1997) concluded, “He climbed the Tower because he wanted to die in a big way . . . making the headlines” (p. 269).

On November 21, 1966, not long after the Texas Tower massacre, a different young man committed an attack at the Rose-Mar College of Beauty in Mesa, Arizona. After he was captured, he said that he got the idea for mass murder from the Texas Tower shooting and the mass murder in Chicago that year. He commented, “I wanted to kill about 40 people so I could make a name for myself. I wanted people to know who I was” (Langman, 2016b). The fact that he had sought to kill forty people just a few months after the killer in Austin had shot over forty people suggests that he not only got the idea for the attack from the previous shooter but also was copying his idea for the magnitude of the attack.

In 1979, as a sixteen-year-old school shooter in San Diego was being taken in by the police after committing a sniper attack at Cleveland Elementary School, she “asked about being on television, and, when told that there were reporters in the area, she said, “That’s great!” Three days before her attack, she had told a friend, “Wait until Monday, and see what I’m going to do. It might even be big enough to make the news” (Langman, 2015). Even long before the attack, she was known to say that she would be famous.

In 1992, an 18-year-old shooter at Simon’s Rock College was captured and incarcerated. While in jail,

the defendant talked about the killings with other inmates and told them that he was excited that he was getting attention from the news media and that he hoped to be on television or have a movie made about what happened.” (Langman, 2015, p. 108)

A teenager in Bethel, Alaska in 1997 was talked into shooting people at his school: “[My friend] said that my face and name would go across the world. He said I’ll become famous. He said lots of people will know about me. He said I should live the fame” (Langman, 2009, p. 115).

One of the Columbine killers wrote, “I want to leave a lasting impression on the world” (“E.H. Online,” p. 39) and had considered mailing his writings to various news outlets. In addition, the two Columbine perpetrators discussed how famous they would become and wondered which director might make a movie about them (“Transcript of the Columbine ‘Basement Tapes,’” 2014).

The Heritage High School shooter in Conyers, Georgia, shed light on his motivation when he “emphasized how much he envied the attention that the Columbine kill-

ers got as a result of their deeds. He said that he was thinking of that when he acted” (Langman, 2017*a*).

The Erfurt, Germany, shooter in 2002 had made numerous comments about his desire for fame. One peer stated, “he wanted everybody to know him and just be famous.” He made remarks such as, “I’m going to be really big one day” and “Everybody will talk about me” (Langman, 2015, p. 23).

The Virginia Tech killer prepared a multimedia manifesto including text, photographs, and videos of himself and mailed this to MSNBC in order to receive posthumous publicity. MSNBC initially aired his video rants until an outraged public demanded that they stop giving an international platform to deranged murderer.

The Murrysville perpetrator commented that his goal was to “Kill enough people so that I would be worshipped too” (Hardway, 2014).

Similarly, the Weis Market shooter left behind 237 pages of his journals, hours of videos of himself, and a large presence on social media. He wrote numerous comments in his journal about seeking fame, such as “I’ll make the news headlines ... I’ve always desired to be famous; to make a name for myself and inspire others ... I want to leave my mark” (“R.S.’s Journal,” pp. 84, 85, 86). He also wrote,

I’ll be the talk of Luzerne County and then a story nationwide. Screw fame, gimme infamy ... In 25 days I’ll go into the history books ... The human race will remember my name for a century.” (“R.S.’s Journal,” pp. 205, 205)

This young man even wondered if “fan girls will obsess over me” (“R.S.’s Journal,” p. 94).

Other shooters have also sought not only instant fame, but lasting recognition. The Jokela shooter had told a student that he was going to “go down in history” (Oksanen, Nurmi, Vuori & Räsänen, 2013, p. 202). The FedEx shooter connected his violence with his desire to make a name for himself, stating, “A life lived in infamy is better than just another nobody” (Visser, 2014).

The theme of going from being a “nobody” to a “somebody” was well articulated by the Umpqua Community College killer as well. His blog about the Roanoke perpetrator who shot and killed a television newscaster and cameraman noted:

So many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are. A man who was known by no one, is now known by everyone. His face splashed across every screen, his name across the lips of every person on the planet, all in the course of one day. Seems the more people you kill, the more you’re in the limelight. (Langman, 2017*a*)

### *Inspiring Others, Leading the Revolution*

A few shooters have not only sought fame, but expressed the desire to become role models for subsequent killers. The Emsdetten shooter, for example, hoped that other people would follow in his footsteps, just as he was following in the footsteps of previous killers: “And I hope that some of ’em will be like [Columbine killers redacted] and Me: A FUCKING HERO!” (“S.B.’s Journal,” 2006, p. 5). Similarly, the Tunkhannock

shooter wrote, “I hope I inspire more shootings” and “I know I’ll spawn cult followers” (“R.S.’s Journal,” 2017, pp. 228, 146).

Other shooters envisioned their attacks as revolutions that would change the world. One of the Columbine killers referred to the need to “kick-start the revolution” and said, “We need to get a chain reaction going here.” He stated, “Most will not see the new world,” as if the shooting would cause a transformation in society (“Transcript,” pp. 4, 7).

The Virginia Tech perpetrator seemed to think he would become a role model for others: “I set the example of the century for my Children to follow” (“S.H.C.’s ‘Manifesto’, 2007, p. 1) He, too, conceptualized his attack as instigating a revolution of profound magnitude that will go on for generations:

The vendetta you have witnessed today will reverberate throughout every home and every soul in America and will inspire the Innocent kids that you have fucked to start a war of vendetta. We will raise hell on earth that the world has never witnessed. Millions of deaths and millions of gallons of blood on the streets will not quench the avenging phoenix that you have caused us to unleash. Generation after generation, we martyrs, like [Columbine killers], will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us. (“S.H.C.’s ‘Manifesto’,” 2007, p. 3)

The Jokela shooter, who admired the Columbine and Virginia Tech perpetrators, appears to have echoed their conceptualization of school shootings as instigating long-lasting societal change:

When the gangsters of the corrupted governments have been shot in the streets ... When intelligent people are finally free and rule the society instead of the idiocratic rule of majority ... In that great day of deliverance, you will know what I want. Long live the revolution. (“P.E.A. Online,” 2007, p. 5)

He also explicitly expressed his hope that he would have followers: “I can’t alone change much but hopefully my actions will inspire all the intelligent people of the world and start some sort of revolution against the current systems” (“P.E.A. Online,” 2007, p. 5).

#### SEQUENCES OF ROLE-MODELING

On August 26, 2015, a man gunned down two television news personnel while they were broadcasting out of a studio in Roanoke, Virginia. He stated, “I was influenced by [Virginia Tech killer]. That’s my boy right there. He got NEARLY double the amount that [Columbine killers] got” (Langman, 2017a). Another shooter, who was also interested in Columbine and Virginia Tech, was fascinated by the Roanoke incident. On August 31, just 5 days after the attack, he posted a blog about the attack. A month later, on October 1, this man committed an attack at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, apparently following his own desire for instant fame. Thus, Columbine led to Virginia Tech, which led to Roanoke, which led to Umpqua. Not that one incident caused the next in the sense of being the only contributing factor, but in each case there is evi-

dence that the subsequent perpetrator admired or was inspired by one or more of the previous attacks.

Similar sequences can be traced to other crimes. For example, Columbine was an influence on the Erfurt shooter, who subsequently was an interest of the Winnenden shooter, and then the Munich shooter made a pilgrimage to Winnenden before committing his own attack. Separately, an even longer chain can be followed from Columbine to Virginia Tech to Northern Illinois University to Sandy Hook to both Arapahoe High School and Umpqua Community College. In this set of cases, the influence of the first high profile shooting had such powerful and lasting effects that it can be traced through five “generations” of subsequent shootings.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the cases presented in this article, the influence of high-profile shooters as role models seem much more powerful than simply producing the specific imitation of copied attack tactics. For the most part, subsequent killers were not gaining insights into attack methodology from their role models, but rather were drawn to the prior perpetrators for a variety of personal reasons.

Simply labeling a perpetrator as a copycat of a previous attacker misses many factors. First, the reasons for copying another shooter can range from perceived similarities between the role model and the subsequent attacker, to sympathy with the role model’s cause, to desire for the same level of fame the role model received, to various other factors. Second, the way the copycat influence manifests itself can vary from quoting shooters’ writings, to imitating their appearance or behavior, to making a pilgrimage to the site of an earlier attack, and more. By recognizing the existence of these many different types and subtypes of influence, scholars and security officials should be able to increase the depth and precision of their understanding of copycat offenders.

It should be noted that although some shooters only fall into one category of influence and others fall into multiple categories, there is no indication that the latter are of greater concern or pose a more dangerous threat than the former. The fact is that even those who were identified based on only one type of influence still carried out deadly attacks.

It also appears that those shooters who idolized previous shooters typically were in their teens or 20s. School shooters in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s typically do not appear to have had prior attackers as role models for their own violence. This may be related to Lankford’s (2016) finding that “fame-seeking rampage shooters averaged 20.4 years old, while other rampage shooters averaged 34.5 years old” (p. 125). Lankford (2016) also noted that, “young people put a much higher priority on being famous than their older counterparts” (p. 125). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014), which has issued public warnings of “the risk for suicide contagion as a result of media reporting,” has suggested that this risk is especially significant for “adolescents and young adults.” There may be other factors involved as well; this warrants further research.

Finally, it is worth noting the global nature of two aspects of this phenomenon. First, shooters in other countries have been aware of and studied shooters in the United States. For example, perpetrators in Brazil, Canada, Finland, and Germany have cited

American shooters. Second, role modeling or imitation has also occurred within each of these countries. In other words, Brazil, Canada, Finland, and Germany, have each had perpetrators who cited previous perpetrators within their own countries as well.

Looking ahead, because of the frequency of mass killers citing previous perpetrators as role models or sources of inspiration, it is critical that media outlets give careful consideration to how they cover such incidents. It seems likely that the more the media focuses on the perpetrators rather than the victims, the more people who are at risk of violence will be influenced to commit their own attacks, whether due to imitation, inspiration, idolizing, perceived similarities, sympathy with the cause, or their desire for fame.

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