



Mass Killing: Whom to Choose; The Gun or The Gunner: A Perspective Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Mass shooting has become a common thing in US with over 200 incidents this year alone. Acts of violence in other forms like terrorist attacks including suicide bombings, public lynching, and honour killings are becoming more and more common. The question before us is each of these acts has a different motive but the end result is violence and tragedy. Uvalde, Texas shooting is the twenty seventh with twenty one innocent lives losing life which included nineteen young children. Where is the fault line; is it the gun or the gunner? Methodology adopted is descriptive research. The gunner in the recent case of school shooting in Texas was an eighteen year old boy. The victims were primary school children. Hence the possibility of the two parties in conflict having met ever before is remote. Is it a case of stress or a psychological disorder? The question assumes importance when we find that gun is being considered as the reason behind the incident and not the gunner. The findings will give an insight on to the relevance of stress management to deal with cases of mass shooting.

Key words: Mass shooting, gun, gunner, stress management, psychological disorder

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Introduction

Mass shooting is public fire arm violence [Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_shootings_in_the_United_States]. As per one study US accounts for a large share of mass shooting. A mass shooting generally involves a shooter killing four or more persons using fire arms at the same place and time. There are various factors which can be attributed to such an act; many blame the gun and some blame the gunner. In the recent shooting case in the primary school many people attributed the cause to easy availability of gun or the gun control lobby. An advanced democratic country like US finding difficulty to control this menace is a surprising factor considering the lesser density of population. Is it the availability of automatic weapon? Probably not, because in that case Afghanistan and countries in turmoil should have a higher number of mass shooting case, but that is not what the statistics bring out. In this year alone US has 200 mass shooting as of now and the statistics shown in internet brings out the figure as 611 in 2020 and 693 in 2021.

Many reasons have been attributed to mass shooting. These are;

- a) High gun density
- b) Bullying in school
- c) Mental illness
- d) Contemporary capitalism, neoliberalism.
- e) Incompetency and lack of commitment to resolve the problem.

2017 Las Vegas mass shooting in Paradise, Nevada was the deadliest with 61 deaths and 867 injuries. Over 500 people having killed in mass shootings of graver kind since 1949. Many countries in Asia and Africa which have not yet transformed into democratic system have easy access to latest automatic weapons at a much cheaper cost than US, but they are far behind in mass killings. We may claim that it may be due to under reporting. Suppose for a moment we remove such a possibility because of the spread of networking, it can be considered that ease of availability of guns is not the prime factor which can be attributed to mass killing. Hence in the course of this paper an attempt is made to analyse the causative factors of mass shooting from the point of mental illness; which may be out of psychiatric problem or other factors such as latent behaviour due to previous negative experiences like bullying, racism or neoliberalism.

In such a consideration of mass shooting from a point of view, the factors such as attribution theory, psychoanalytical theory and transactional theory as well as emotional blackmail are activated. We would consider the attribution error, personality development, life positions to develop a realistic mental state of the person who indulges in mass shooting.

Literature review

An article titled 'Are mass shootings an American epidemic?' published a year back discusses that gun violence is deadlier than mass shooting. [The Conversation, 2020] In another article titled 'In gun debate both sides have evidence to back them up' brings out the fact that stricter gun laws may reduce mass shooting, but then other factors are also important. [Zac Lang, 2021 University of Missouri]. In another article titled 'School shootings are a record high this year' the author brings out that schools shootings are phenomenally preceded by quite a number of warning signs. [James Densley, 2021, Metropolitan State University] In an article Mass shootings are happening at Grocery stores, the author states that 13% of the shooters are motivated by racial hatred. [Jillian Peterson, 2022, Hamline University] In another article by Arie Kruglanski, it has been brought out that, there is a mental and psychological dimension to what leads people to mass killings. In another article it is suggested that the people indulging in mass shooting reveal their plan before hand.

Hence the psychological dimension from the capricious point of view of human mind has not been attempted in the recent past. This encourages the writer to undertake a research on mental illness factor of mass shooting from the attribution error, psychoanalytical point of view and transactional analysis.

Mental state of a mass killer

Hatred is considered to be one of the main factors which lead a person to commit an act of mass shooting. One of the evolving feature or dominant iteration of hatred is the personality development of the individual and the life positions. As per the thought process laid out by Sigmund Freud, majority of the personality of an individual is developed by the age of six. The most important factor to be considered in this is that personality development goes through the same stages in the same order for all individuals. In this process it is likely that certain incidents can create fixation in the tender mind which is as a result of unresolved conflict or emotional hang-up caused by overindulgence or frustration. In the shorter period a person may choose the defence mechanism of avoiding, distorting or denying the sources of threat or anxiety. These may be in the form of denial, repression, projection or rationalisation. In certain other cases it may result in reaction formation.

It is normal that when an individual is growing up, owing to the circumstances surrounding the person, they make basic assumptions about themselves and people around them. When a person during his childhood experience comes across a dominant philosophy it would generate a characteristic behaviour in him, which may be tied to his existence, distinctiveness, esteem and discernment of other people. It is unfortunate that characteristically such a position tends to remain with the individual's personality unless he encounters decisive changes. In this process of identifying life positions with the personality of individual the individual chooses one of the four life positions ascribing value to individual and people around him which are namely;

- i. No value: I am not OK, you are not OK.
- ii. Both have value: I am OK, you are OK.
- iii. Individual has value but not the society: I am OK, you are not OK
- iv. Individual has no value but others have value: I am not OK, you are OK.

When the life position is I am OK, you are not OK such a group of people generally fall in the critical parent ego state. It is an observed understanding that more often than not they tend to be down on other people with curmudgeon either because they anticipate that other people are a basis of criticism. Such a thought process complicates further when they go into a deep shell they shy away from public appearances considering that they are not perfect people for the society. As a result of such an introversion they consider people around them are enemies and excessively critical of them. From this self proclaimed captivity they would try to break away and show credulous behaviour. The dilemma would be that these individuals are not aware of the process of getting out from this shell and in that confusion they would undertake Machiavellianism. In many such cases of mass shooting the development takes place in this manner.

Inadvertently while a person is growing up he may encounter contrite, contumacious behaviour and emotional blackmail of one form or the other. Unfortunately it may be that in the vast group of teenagers, there may be a person who has been constantly subjected to 'punisher's threat'. Constantly bombarded with this threat he gets habituated and firm's a view point that solution to any problem is punishment. As this individual grows up such a feeling is deep rooted and may in the process of facing eventful situations reach a conclusion that the remedy to the problem he is encountering is causing grievous harm to the challengers. The challengers may be hypothetical or realistic as well as across sections of society or age groups. All that the disoriented individual desires is seeking approval from another person. The later he comes across an influencing personality act of social disarray will not occur but otherwise it can lead to a reprisal like mass killing where the individual through the narrow prism of his mental faculty conceives threat.

Throughout an individual's life strokes are elements which confirm an individual's position. In case the strokes we as individual imbibe are too far positive or too many negatives we are likely to struggle with a fair sense of the world. Such people find it difficult to see others point of view. In such a scenario complexity arises when the individual develops over fervid and exaggerated sense of their own worth. It is natural that individuals who are in such a state of mind would contrive to extreme activities of mass shooting in states of mental bouts or exasperation.

Where does the life position comes across individuals hatred towards the society or it is a spurt of cognitive dissonance where individual escapes from realistic world to world which supports his thought process? It is partially the psychoanalytical state of mind of an individual and transaction which he

assigns importance. An individual irrespective of age gets in to a bout of irrational, illogical, impulsive dimension of personality which is identified as Id. This state of mind is largely captivated by a state of awareness called the unconscious mind, wherein it is difficult to bring to conscious awareness thoughts, feelings, urges and other information. When an individual reaches congruence of state of mind 'Id' and state of awareness 'Unconscious' he becomes a different person and then is driven by irrational and illogical thoughts. Such a state of mind will bring back poor and negative reflections of life. In this state of mind brings in a general aversion to good things of life and hatred. If at that time he is pivoted from such a state to normalcy, the likelihood of a great tragedy is averted. On the other hand such an individual who is on the edge of the cliff is trip wired by a small negative influence he is driven to an extreme state of callous and dangerous behaviour.

There is a consideration that neurotic anxiety caused by Id impulses can be barely controlled. In cases of mass shooting the circumstantial factors lead to an assertion that neurotic anxiety may be the causative factor. The bigger question is that in case incidents of smaller nature can impact minds to commit a mass murder, then can we consider it as a breakdown of communication. As provided in the transactional analysis shock and emotions fluttering to an uncontrollable level can be as a result of improper communication. In the sense that when people communicate from different ego states, even though it appears that a person is fully present in conversation but he may not be. In such a state the individual is often confused by subconscious interruption of past experiences on the present behaviour.

There have been mass shooting due to the influence of drugs or other substances, but then that also does not happen any other day, which brings us back to the point that it is the personality, state of mind and the trip wire which finally prompts into an act of such a serious nature. How do we identify potential in a person to undertake a mass shooting? Realistically speaking it is not difficult in any society. An aggrieved youth or individual definitely displays augury by showing reflections of his mind at some point of interaction or at least during some of the transactions. The earlier such an abstemious behaviour is identified the curative process is much easier. We may identify that break up families has brought in a sense of desperation or austere behaviour by parents that some of the youth are driven to constant state of desperation.

Influence of Rap culture and drugs have been found to be abjuring in certain cases of mass shooting. There are certain assertions made in the context of a recent shooting down a rap singer. How does it influence is the bigger question? Usually the fan following in the rap culture has a certain demographic pattern and social influence. Aberrant acts of glorifying the effects of drugs or for bilk signifying the importance of automatics have in many ways taken as a canard by certain sections of the society as a panacea to the never ending struggle within or outside the society. Under such circumstances a dissatisfied or distorted mind can identify with the rap singer and idolize the act of mass shooting. Here again through that act the killer is giving vent to his desperation, which in many cases is an illusionary state of mind.

Media, whether it is print, visual or social media has a role in spreading violence. Irresponsible reporting or inclusion of contents which are damaging unsettled mind can propel a latent thought which is simmering in the preconscious level to conscious level. Then the Id state of mind catches on and converts the embryonic thought or desperation to an evil act. It may be fine for the parents of the shooter as reported in the media to have apologized to the near and dear ones of the children who were shot. But a sorry can't make a dead person alive. Rather than such an abase realization at a later stage in case any one of the parent rather than abdicating their responsibilities were proactive enough could have put the teenager shooter on a psychological counselling understanding the deviation and desperation in the mind of the individual which would have abated his acidulous grievances.

Analysis

While carrying out the analysis our assertions would be based on the derivations carried out as regards the mind of the mass killer and availability of automatics which are essentially used to perpetrate the crime. Automatics are a lifeless item which gets activated when it occupies a position in the hands of a person. If weapons are cause of mass shooting, then more deaths should have been of that nature in Afghanistan or some parts of Pakistan where tremendous loss of life take place because on suicide bombings. Here also there are oppressed feelings given air by such acts. In these places of mass murder in a different way, availability of AK 47 is not restricted in anyway. Compared to the population in USA, they are less educated and less advanced existing on bare necessities. Despite that any reason whatsoever does not prompt a person to undertake mass killing using automatics. It is worthwhile analysing this aspect in a standalone manner rather than grouping with other events.

As per the reports of Action on armed violence recorded 1797 deaths over 61 incidents using suicide weapons. This is an increase from the previous year by 450 deaths not considering the fact that there were more suicide bombings during the previous year. Surprisingly these are generally carried out in population centres and 95% were carried using improvised explosives. As per action on armed violence countries which are affected by suicide bombings include Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Uganda. Like the mass killings using automatics perpetrators of suicide bombers generally remain obscure. As per records since 2011, there have been over 2000 suicide bombings killing over 85,000 people and most of the targets are civilians. These countries which have more number of suicide attacks are also the countries where automatic weapons are largely available at marginal cost.

Hence a mass killing can be resorted to by use of automatics or suicide bombings. In either of the case the target population is civilians. In case the availability of automatics is the predominant reason for mass killing then 927 deaths in Afghanistan during 2021 due to suicide bombings fail to give a reasonable conclusion. It may be reasonable to assume that obtaining an automatic is easier in Afghanistan in comparison to USA. It is for certain that the suicide bomber in all case loses his life whereas that is not the case of a person indulging in mass shooting. Therefore if killing is the agenda it would be more prudent on the part of a killer to use automatic rather than a suicide bomb. The presumption here is that either way it is the hatred towards a group of people for whatever may be the reason which precipitates into an action.

Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that it is not the availability of the weapon which provides an avenue for a mass killer but the mental frame work of the person who has been psychologically turned into a weak person. So if the availability of automatic is not the leading reason for mass killing we may draw upon the fact that mental makeup of the person is the reason for the mass killing. Such an inference leads us to the belief that psychological derailment or deviance in thought process is the prime reason for mass killings. With this assumption it may lead us to the inference that propinquity to an automatic may be a contributory factor but never the prime reason for the mass killing. Break down of family system and individualistic approach seen in the light of neoliberalism may lead us to believe that no one has time for anyone. In such a scenario, a person irrespective of age does not have a space to give vent to his feelings. Negative feelings which rests in the mind of a person over a period of time, finally bursts open when faced with a situation of this nature. On the other hand at the appropriate time in case they get patient listening from a friend or a family member then the negative feelings can be removed to great extent resulting in normalcy. The stress is obviated somewhat akin to the reaction of the mice in Han Syele's experiments on stress management.

As an afterthought one of the governments has moved ahead to make stringent gun control laws. Again the thought process is wrong. There are adequate laws which could have prevented possession of automatics by this individual, but the possible error is lack of total commitment in implementation. Laws are adequate, punishment are stringent on the subject of drugs, but then evading the scrutiny of authorities use of drugs continues as ever before. One of the States of India brought in the law prohibiting use of liquor. By no way it reduced consumption of liquor. Spurious liquor started gaining access and unscrupulous elements harvesting on such an opportunity. A tough gun control law in India has not prevented the use of guns for violence but it gave avenues of illegal manufacturing of weapons. So laws can help in certain way and has its own limit, but more importantly it is targeting the disturbed human mind. In the case provisions of laws are different in contiguous areas; it will result into smuggling of weapons and not obliterating mass shooting.

Findings

Whether it is mass killings or suicide bombings, they leave a trail of tragedy. The perpetrators rarely suffer, which leads us to the important fact that a serious research on this subject without any bias is carried out. Despite suffering casualties since ages USA is caught in a dilemma between the gun and the gunner. People are divided over the cause of this evil. The point to ponder is that why despite being less economically advanced India does not report alarming occurrence of mass killing. Probably it is the psychological appraisal of the situation. Whereas in countries where mass killings are a frequent occurrence family values have very less space and individualism tends to control the human life. When individualistic character is the core of the society mood, even mood swings may result into serious incidents. On the other hand if a caring mind is available to listen to the problem each individual has the habit of resorting to extreme methods to give vent to distorted feelings would be replaced by a healing touch.

Even if advanced countries do not want to change their family system, the society can take over the job of combating disorganized human minds. Social security organizations put in a lot of effort and work enthusiastically to observe people. In this process they can easily track down disturbed minds. It is these disturbed minds with life positions 'I am not ok or you are not ok' which needs careful counselling. These counselling work the same way as family bonds in established societies. An important role can be played by the religious teachers who can be observers of the society to come out with observable violent changes in the individual. It is certain that every individual experience the life in a particular way, some good and others bad. It is those people who had a poor upbringing or insufficient care who if left unattended resort to dastardly act like mass killings in the form of shooting at innocent civilians using automatics or with explosives. They should be identify and treated to change the mind set. A rational person cannot resort to killing school children, which implies that while undertaking the crime the shooter was not in the correct ego state. Possibly he was controlled by the Id ego state.

Conclusion

Mass killings by way of shooting with automatics or suicide bombings have orphaned quite a lot of families. It has destroyed families. Debates may continue on the rationality of gun control laws, but then is it the gun which is the cause of the crime or the human mind which is acting the reason.

The article proposes to throw light on the importance of considering and controlling human mind to ward off mass killings in the way of shooting with automatics or suicide bombs. In the analysis when a person blames availability of weapon as the cause there appears to be an attribution error. Hence we are compelled to consider the personality development of an individual, the life position the person takes and definitely the family bonding as crucial factors in mass killings.

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