School Shootings: Existential Concerns and Implicit Religion

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School shooters are bullied loners with a psychiatric history and an obsession with violent popular culture. This seems to be an image of the typical school shooter in popular perception. Empirical studies, however, suggest that, to date, no reliable profile of school shooters exist. This follows in part from the simple statistical logic that the number of school shootings is relatively low. Known shooters have different family backgrounds and educational histories, the socioeconomic context differs and their age varies considerably, between eleven and twenty-five years old. A general bipartite of scientific explanation is found: personal causes and social causes. Whatever the scientific angle of the researchers is, they always conclude, that drawing an unambiguous picture of a school shooter is not possible. Despite the fact that the empirical findings so far are in favor of heterogeneity of the phenomenon, there seems to exist a typical homogeneous image of school shooters. Particularly, when a school shooting occurs the media often portray the perpetrator as a bullied loner. This image forming influences popular perceptions of school shooters. Furthermore, popular perceptions of school shooters can be a problem regarding prevention. On one hand, influenced by incorrect perceptions, one could easily overlook warning signals, which a seemingly nice and popular student sends. On the other hand, this could damage harmless students, if stigmatized by others because they meet this image. Even more creative interpretations of school shootings interpret the cause of these crimes in various ways. Some filmmakers portray social factors like bullying and hyper-masculinity as motive for the shooters, while others see personal causes like psychiatric problems as cause. They often use a number of clichés, like the isolated, somewhat weird loner who is bullied, to paint the picture of a school shooter or, alternatively, a youngster who becomes a suspect because of these clichés. Interestingly, neither in public debate nor in academic discussion are school shootings interpreted as meaningful behavior and an existential crisis of the perpetrator never is considered as genesis of this crime.

There is one commonality, which can contribute to our understanding of what motivates these perpetrators: they all announce their plans in some way. This 'leaking' comes in various forms. It can be indirectly, e.g. in drawings, and directly, e.g. manifestos in the form of videos on the Internet. These expressions present a valuable source for understanding how they see the world and their own position in it. In these egodocuments it was found that all shooters express existential dilemmas. More importantly, the documents show that the shooters are not finding a balance between existential concerns and the facts of life. For example, the fact that we are all mortal is counterweighed by the idea that the school shooting will make them world-famous and never-forgotten, immortal in a way. In another example, the fact that existential freedom makes us, in consequence, fully responsible for our lives, including our failures, is counterweighed by school shooters by blaming others for their misery and ultimately for the shooting. Or, the fact that they do

not have the feeling that they are accepted by others is counterweighed by the claim that they are superior to everyone, even god-like. Apparently, to the school shooters, their lives do not live up to the expectations set for them. To deal with this imbalance they deny facts of life and develop the idea that with a school shooting they can create meaning for both their life and death. In other words, school shooters are not searching for balance; instead, they try to solve their existential dilemmas with violence. Denying the fact of life that they are average boys, maybe rejected by others or, occasionally, bullied, they create an identity of an avenging angel, a god-like person who takes revenge and kills inferiors.

School shooters deny the fact that we all are in essence alone, instead creating the idea that their deed is for the benefit of many others. Denying the fact that they are mortal, like all of us, they assume that the shooting will make them famous and never forgotten. Denying that the consequence of freedom is responsibility for our own lives, including misery, they blame others for the shooting. The notion that they 'have to do this' because others made them can be found in the expressions of all perpetrators. Denying that their crime is a meaningless act of violence, a murder of innocent people, they call their deed a revolution or a war. The idea of solving existential dilemmas drives school shooters to construct reality in a way that infuses their life with meaning. Studying school shootings from an existential perspective suggests a starting point which has so far been neglected in studies of school shootings, namely the "inner world of experiences" of the perpetrators. In other words, the starting point of this study is how school shooters experience their "being-in-the-world" and what meaning they assign to their life and consequently to their deed and possible death.

The exaggerated myths of becoming immortal, scapegoating others, and declaring themselves god-like all indicate an existential crisis. This crisis spurs a search for meaning. Traditionally, religion is one of the major resources used to generate meaning in life. School shooters find meaning in their violent deed. In this way, school shootings are meaning-giving constructs. This does not lead to the argument that school shootings are religiously motivated but does indicate the religious dimension of these crimes. In order to understand the possible religious dimensions a broader definition of religion was considered: Bailey's (1997) concept of *implicit religion.* To identify the implicit religion of school shootings a method developed by Schnell's (2004) was used. She argues that three structures myth, ritual and experience of transcendence are common to all explicit religions. When associated with personally meaningful contents, these structures become representatives of implicit religiosity. Then they turn into personal myth, personal rituals and subjectively accessible transcendent experiences. Not only were these structures found in every individual case, striking commonalities were also found in the personal myths, personal rituals and transcendent experiences of school shooters:

- Regarding personal myths was found that the perpetrators portray their deed as a war between good and evil. In the myths of school shooters their identity changes from average school boy into a god-like avenging angel, who is prepared to die like a martyr. To them there is no other way to solve their problems than to execute their violent plans. In addition, the shooting will make them famous and ensure they are never forgotten.

- Regarding the personal rituals was found that they collect weapons, which also have a symbolic function. Some even name their weapons. The shooting itself is a performative form of violence which resembles religious rituals.

- Regarding transcendent experiences feelings of superiority and experience of a more god-like self were found. School shooters identify themselves with other school shooters or powerful role-models and create feelings of being of great significance. They express, that with the shooting they will change the world.

This new perception of school shootings of school shootings as meaning-giving constructs allows to argue that to the perpetrators the school shooting is a rational act. The deed is a meaning-giving construct which reduces the existential crisis of these adolescents. School shootings can be understood as trans-ethical violent actions driven by implicit religion. This leads to a very new understanding of school shootings as meaningful behavior. Moreover, this leads to querying the common perspective on school shootings in terrorism studies. A number of studies explicitly foreclose school shooters when they define the term lone wolf because the latter have political or religious motives and the researchers state, that this cannot be found in school shootings. Spaaij (2012) puts this firm statement in perspective when he points out that the true motives of lone wolves are very difficult to determine and that "lone wolves tend to create their own individualized ideologies from a mixture of broader political, religious or social aims and personal frustration and aversion"(p. 20). The comparison of existential concerns and implicit religion of the studied school shooters and a number of lone wolf terrorists showed that myth, ritual and transcendent experiences are present in all cases. Sometimes the myths are more personal, and sometimes they are influenced by existing religions or political movements, but the clear commonality is that their violent deed is a meaning-giving construct to these perpetrators. Notably, in the egodocuments of the analyzed cases found a number of common themes were found:

- In all cases the deed is justified as an act of revenge. As avenging angels they retaliate for injustice against them or people like themselves.

- In all cases seeking for some kind of transcendental reward is a theme. To some it is the expectation of paradise, to others eternal fame, but it is always a kind of reward that lasts longer than earthly life.

- In all cases expressions were found that the perpetrators feel that they are chosen to fight evil. To them they sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

- In all cases it was found that the perpetrators do not see their crime as a meaningless act of violence but as an act of war or revolution. To them it is a fight between good and evil and they express this with apocalyptic language.

These perpetrators share obvious similarities and therefore school shooters should not be excluded from studies of lone wolves. Studying these perpetrators as one phenomenon will enlarge the body of data and thus make more profound research possible. Eventually this will deepen our understanding of the motives of these perpetrators and possibly help us to identify more effective intervention with the purpose of prevention.

The present study offers a comparison of various perspectives of theory, popular perception/culture/ terroristic studies regarding the causes of school shooting. By adding a new perspective of existential concerns and implicit religion it leads to new insights into the motives of school shooters.