

Fame-seeking rampage shooters: Initial findings and empirical predictions

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Fame-Seeking Rampage Shooters: Initial Findings and Empirical Predictions

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Abstract

Increasingly in America, fame is revered as the ultimate form of prestige-bearing success, and the distinction between fame and infamy seems to be disappearing. In this context, some rampage shooters succumb to “delusions of grandeur” and seek fame and glory through killing. The present study offers initial findings on the behavior of fame-seeking rampage shooters, and then tests for differences between offenders who explicitly sought fame and other offenders. The results suggest that fame-seeking rampage shooters have existed for more than 40 years, but they are more common in recent decades and in the United States than in other countries. Overall, fame-seeking offenders appear younger than other rampage shooters, and they kill and wound significantly more victims. Several empirical predictions are made about the expected frequency and characteristics of future rampage shootings.

Keywords: Rampage Shooters; Mass Shooters; Fame; Infamy; Celebrity Culture.

Introduction

It has long been observed that some people will do almost anything for personal success. One of the first scholars to research this behavior was Merton (1938), who suggested that when individuals lack the legitimate means to reach the levels of success to which they aspire, they are more likely to use deviant or criminal means to accomplish their goals. As Merton (1938) explained, “In societies such as our own...the pressure of prestige-bearing success tends to eliminate the effective social constraint over means employed to this end. ‘The end justifies the means’ doctrine becomes a guiding tenet for action” (p. 681).

However, definitions of “success” are socially influenced and normative. Merton (1938) was primarily focused on the quests of lower-class individuals to obtain wealth and rise in social class. However, other scholars have extended his theories to include a broader range of culturally-defined goals, such as desires for accomplishments in school, work, sports, romance, and family-building (Agnew, 1984; Elliott et al., 1985; Quicker, 1974). Another important extension has come from Parnaby and Sacco (2004), who detail how fame has become a “universal success goal” (p. 3), and thus produces a range of deviant behaviors that are consistent with Merton’s (1938) theories. People commit crimes to achieve professional and financial success, so in cultures where being a celebrity is viewed as the ultimate achievement, it should not be surprising that some individuals would lie, cheat, and steal to become famous (Parnaby & Sacco, 2004, Pinsky & Young, 2008).

Unfortunately, it is increasingly clear that some people will kill for fame and glory. In recent decades, there have been several high-profile rampage shooters who directly expressed this

motive. Rampage shooters, who are also commonly referred to as “active shooters” or “public mass shooters,” are a particularly unusual subtype of homicide offenders because they typically kill random strangers or bystanders, not only specific, targeted victims (Newman et al., 2004; Kelly, 2012). Notable examples of those who have sought fame include 1999 Columbine school shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, 2007 Nebraska mall shooter Robert Hawkins, and 2007 Virginia Tech university shooter Seung Hui Cho.

However, although a number of scholars have identified this aspect of these offenders’ behavior (Langman, 2015a; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Lankford, 2013b; Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; O’Toole, 2014), it does not appear to have ever been the focus of a scholarly study. Much remains unknown. What does a close analysis of the statements and actions of fame-seeking rampage shooters reveal about their behavior? Are there significant differences between offenders who explicitly sought fame and other offenders? And what are the long term social implications of these fame-seeking crimes? Given what is known about trends in American culture and American media, is it possible to make sound empirical predictions about the frequency and characteristics of future rampage shootings?

American Idolization of Fame

Increasingly in America—perhaps more than in any other country on the globe—fame is revered as an end unto itself (Caufield, 2015; Gountas et al., 2012; Parnaby & Sacco, 2004, Pinsky & Young, 2008; Twenge, 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Sternheimer, 2011; Uhlis & Greenfield 2011). It has become arguably the ultimate form of what Merton (1938) referred to as “prestige-bearing success” (p. 681)—regardless of how it is achieved.

Decades of data show that on average, children born in the United States in recent decades have loftier expectations for their own success than previous generations. This includes their expectations of becoming rich and famous (Schneider & Stevenson 1999; Twenge, 2014). According to Pew Research Center surveys, 51% of Americans aged 18-25 say that “to be famous” is one of their generation’s most important goals in life (Pew Research Center, 2007). By contrast, older generations put higher priorities on becoming more spiritual, helping people, and being leaders in their community (Pew Research Center, 2007). As the Pew authors explain, young Americans appear to be both shaped by their culture and actively shaping it. “They are the ‘Look at Me’ generation. Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and MyYearbook allow individuals to post a personal profile complete with photos and descriptions of interests and hobbies. A majority of *Gen Nexters* have used one of these social networking sites” (Pew Research Center, 2007, p. 2).

In America, 81% percent of today’s high school students say they expect to have a “great paying job” by age twenty-five, and 26% say they believe they will soon be famous (Barna, 2010; Twenge 2014). Many more dream of becoming rock stars, recording artists, Hollywood actors, or superstar athletes—and are confident that these dreams will come true (Twenge, 2014). One example comes from budding musician Nellie McKay, who at age 19 explained that already, “I’ve been telling [my friends] *for years* that I’m going to be famous. When I look at me in the mirror, I see someone on the front cover of *US Weekly*” (Twenge, 2014, p. 122).

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with being ambitious, past research suggests that these specific types of priorities are not particularly healthy. In fact, Kasser and Ryan (1993) suggest that they represent “a dark side of the American Dream” (p. 410). Psychological studies

have found that people who define their success based on the achievement of extrinsic goals—such as fame, image, and money—instead of intrinsic goals—such as personal growth, relatedness, or well-being—appear particularly prone to anxiety, narcissism, and depression (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Nickerson et al., 2003).

This phenomenon of increased fame-seeking in America appears to have been accompanied by an increased blurring of the distinction between fame and infamy (Levin et al., 2005; Levin & Madfis, 2008; Pinsky & Young, 2008; Reagan, 2007). In retrospect, this was a predictable outcome, because there seems to be too much demand for fame in America, and not enough supply (Pinsky & Young, 2008; Twenge, 2014). Naturally, some people respond by pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior in an effort to get what they want. This social phenomenon has precedent. As Merton (1938) explained, when people compete for wealth, but cannot obtain it through legitimate means, they are more likely to engage in deviant or criminal behavior to become rich. In fact, their deviant behavior becomes more socially acceptable, because it is understood as the necessary means to a culturally-approved end (Merton, 1938). Similarly, when people compete for fame, but cannot obtain it by doing positive things, they are more likely to do outrageous, salacious, morally questionable, or illegal things to get attention—and over time, that becomes more socially acceptable as well.

From a broad historical perspective, the appeal of getting fame at any cost is not new. Braudy (1997) traces *The Frenzy of Renown* through thousands of years of human history. Even the notion that “there is no such thing as bad publicity” has been around for more than a century. As Oscar Wilde ([1891] 2001) suggested, “There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is *not* being talked about.” However, this comic observation no longer appears humorous.

For instance, a recent study of twenty-five years of magazine covers documents this apparent cultural shift in which criminal behavior is rewarded with fame. As Levin et al. (2005) explain, “During the early years, most of the stars were on *People’s* cover because they had accomplished a virtuous objective. More recently, however, the magazine heaped attention—perhaps inordinate attention—on the ‘accomplishments’ of rapists, child abusers, drug addicts, and murderers” (p. 1). In a particularly telling quote, a former *People* magazine editor explained that “We haven’t changed the concept of the magazine; we’re just expanding the concept of *star*” (Levin & Madfis, 2008, p. 187).

It appears that American media and American culture have done the same (Gountas et al., 2012; Levin et al., 2005; Levin & Madfis, 2008; Pinsky & Young, 2008; Reagan, 2007). Daytime talk shows seem to have no shortage of volunteers eager to discuss their illicit affairs and illegitimate children to obtain their fifteen minutes of fame. And many reality television shows systematically entertain their viewers by encouraging average Americans to compromise their morals or sell their dignity (Gountas et al., 2012; Young & Pinsky, 2006). In fact, American reality television stars commonly brag about their willingness to manipulate, backstab, and betray their fellow competitors, and then they rationalize that behavior by insisting “I’m not here to make friends” (Beard, 2012). One of the more recent glaring examples of average people’s desperate desires for fame is the reality show “Sex Box,” which debuted in the United States in February 2015. Each episode, three romantic couples “have sex in a soundproof, camera-free hanging glass contraption while a panel of experts discusses their relationship mere feet away” (Roth, 2015). The show seems to add conflict to their relationships, rather than help them, so it begs the question: is there anything that some people will not do to become famous?

Fame Through Killing

In general, prior research has documented several factors that help explain the psychology and behavior of rampage shooters. One key finding is that they are typically struggling with mental health problems or suicidal tendencies (Fox & Levin, 1994; Langman, 2015a; Lankford, 2015b; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Mullen, 2004; Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox, 2009; Vossekuil et al., 2002). For example, Mullen (2004) personally assessed five rampage shooters who survived their crimes, and found that all five offenders had planned to kill themselves or die during their attacks. Similarly, in their studies of rampage school shooters, Newman et al. (2004) and Newman and Fox (2009) found that overall, more than 90% of attackers from 1974 to 2008 struggled with suicidality, mental illness, or depression. At the same time, it is important to recognize that these problems cannot be the complete explanation for these offenders' behavior, because the vast majority of people who struggle with mental illness never harm anyone (Metzl & MacLeish, 2013).

Another important finding is that rampage shooters often believe they have been underappreciated, disrespected, or mistreated (Cullen, 2009; Langman, 2015a; Lankford, 2015b; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Mullen, 2004; Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox, 2009). These feelings are often associated with conflicts at school or work, such as negative social interactions with teachers, fellow students, bosses, or coworkers, or formal disciplinary actions, such as being suspended, expelled, demoted, or fired (Fox & Levin, 1994; Lankford, 2015a; Mullen, 2004; Newman et al., 2004; Vossekuil et al., 2002). In some cases, the offenders' perceptions that they were underappreciated or mistreated may be based on something real, but in many cases, their perceptions appear distorted by the offenders' own depression, paranoia, schizophrenia, or narcissism (Langman, 2015a; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Newman et al. 2004; Newman & Fox, 2009). There often appears to be an interaction between their mental health problems and perceived victimization, whereby their coping mechanisms fail and they spiral into despair and rage. Instead of moving on with their lives, they begin to plan their deadly attacks.

In this context of mental illness and perceived victimization, some rampage shooters succumb to criminal "delusions of grandeur," and seek fame and glory through killing. At least in part, their desire for fame can be understood as attempted compensation for the belief that they were underappreciated, disrespected, or mistreated in the past. Instead of being marginalized, ignored, or forgotten, they want to show the world that they deserved far more attention—and now they are going to get it (Cullen, 2009; Larkin, 2009; Newman et al., 2004). As Newman (2007) explains, many school shooters "are searching for a way to retire their public image as dweebs and misfits, exchanging it for something more alluring: the dangerous, violent man" (Newman, 2007, p. 29).

Unfortunately, many of these attackers accurately recognize that the only way they can guarantee that their names and faces adorn magazines, newspapers, television, and the internet is by murdering unarmed men, women, or children (Levin & Madfis, 2008; Lankford & Hakim, 2011). As Larkin (2009) explains, "The body count, almost always innocent bystanders, exists primarily as a method of generating media attention" (p. 1322). To this end, the media coverage of their attacks seems to give them exactly what they want—even when it is done responsibly, criticizes their behavior, and avoids the most salacious details. For these offenders, the ends appear to justify the means, which is consistent with Merton's (1938) theories. And because many of them are already struggling with mental illness or suicidality, the fact that they may die during their

attacks does not detract from the appeal of postmortem fame. In fact, these individuals are often attracted to the Hollywood-glorified notion of “going out in a blaze of glory” (Lankford, 2013b; Larkin, 2009).

In one of the few studies that provides any analysis of this motive, Larkin (2009) refers to it as “killing for notoriety” and suggests that it drove the actions of at least six offenders who were involved in five attacks: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Robert Hawkins, Seung Hui Cho, Jeffrey Weise, and Matthew Murray. And the evidence of fame-seeking is unambiguous in the cases of Harris, Klebold, Hawkins, and Cho, who openly acknowledged it in their videos, notes, and manifestos. Harris exclaimed, “Isn’t it fun to get the respect that we’re going to deserve?” and fantasized with Klebold about how movie directors Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino would be fighting over the rights to their life story (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Hawkins bragged in his suicide note that, “I’m gonna be [expletive] famous” (USA Today, 2007). Cho wrote in his manifesto, “I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people,” and then filmed himself and sent the videos directly to NBC News (Hauser, 2007; Langman, 2015b). These have been the most commonly cited examples of public mass shooters who sought fame (Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Lankford, 2013b).

However, given the paucity of research on this particular motive, other indicators of rampage shooters seeking fame require more interpretation. It could be argued that every offender who leaves behind a suicide note, manifesto, or video should be classified as an attention or fame-seeker. In fact, these communications are typically labeled “legacy tokens” by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Van Dreal, 2011) because they directly shape the way that offenders are remembered. And they are quite common: in his study of suicidal attackers in the United States from 1990-2010, Lankford (2013a) found that 50% of school shooters and 56% of other public rampage shooters provided direct written or verbal explanations for their behavior. At the same time, however, it should be acknowledged that at least a few of these notes were apparently intended as apologies to friends and family. For example, school shooter Duane Morrison left behind a fourteen page suicide note, but claimed, “I prefer that this letter be read only by Gary, JoAnn, Rebecca, and Judy” (Langman, 2015b).

It could also be argued that every offender who kills to make a political or ideological statement should be considered a fame-seeker, because these individuals are often trying to seize public attention and send their message to a wide audience. If so, the other two shooters identified by Larkin (2009)—Weise, who espoused Neo-Nazi propaganda in his internet posts, and Murray, who posted online that “Christianity this is YOUR Columbine”—would clearly qualify, along with many others (Larkin, 2009, p. 1318).

The Present Study

The present study started with a relatively straightforward goal: conduct a close analysis of the statements and actions of fame-seeking rampage shooters to shed new light on their behavior. To ensure that the analysis did not include ambiguous or uncertain cases, this study focused solely on offenders who explicitly said or wrote something that revealed their desire for fame.

It should be emphasized that this is a very high standard of evidence. In general, it is much more difficult to document any offenders’ motives than it is to identify facts about their lives. For example, there are many potential ways to verify if someone has been expelled from school or fired from work, because that is an objective fact that would appear in formal records, and may

also stand out in the memories of acquaintances. However, an offender's motives can be kept completely secret if the individual does not voice them, as is often the case. Suicide notes, manifestos, and homemade videos may offer some information on offenders' thinking, but a substantial percentage of rampage shooters do not leave behind any evidence of this type (Lankford, 2013a).

Furthermore, for the present study, if the evidence was primarily circumstantial, the offender was not assumed to be fame-seeking. In other words, those who left behind suicide notes, claimed to be fighting for an ideological cause, or staged their crimes in a dramatic or theatrical manner were not counted on those grounds alone. Similarly, if an offender had been described as fame-seeking by previous researchers but direct evidence was not provided, the offender was not counted. For example, the biographer of University of Texas shooter Charles Whitman suggested that, "He climbed the Tower because he wanted to die in a big way; not by suicide, but by taking others with him and making the headlines" (Lavergne, 1997, p. 269). The researchers who have made this assertion about Whitman (Lavergne, 1997; O'Toole, 2014) may be completely correct, but it is unclear what their basis was for ascribing this motive to Whitman, and Whitman's pre-attack letters and suicide notes did not contain explicit statements to this effect. Therefore, Whitman and other similarly described offenders were not assumed to be fame-seeking for the present study's analysis unless direct statements about this motive could be found.

Data Sources

The benefit of maintaining such a high standard of evidence is that it helps ensure the validity of the study's findings. The cost is that it becomes much more challenging to find relevant, qualifying cases. For this reason, a random sampling procedure, which would further limit the number of offenders analyzed, was not used. Instead, convenience sampling was employed: every rampage shooter's suicide note, manifesto, or video that could be found was searched for motives of fame-seeking, along with prior scholarship, government reports, and media reports on rampage shooters.

As a starting point, this included Newman et al.'s (2004) study of 27 school shooters from 1974-2002, Newman and Fox's (2009) study of nine school shooters from 2002-2008, Larkin's (2009) study of 23 school shooters from 1999-2007, Lankford's (2013a) study of 69 rampage shooters from 1990-2010, and Langman's (2015a) study of 48 school shooters from 1966-2012. The New York City Police Department's report on 324 active shooting incidents from 1966-2012 was also consulted (Kelly, 2012), along with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's report on 160 active shootings incidents from 2000-2013 (Blair & Schweit, 2014), and additional scholarly sources and media sources which had direct quotes from offenders. However, it should be emphasized that there may be many additional fame-seeking rampage shooters whose motives could not be fully confirmed or substantiated.

Analysis

The present study's first goal was to conduct a close analysis of fame-seeking rampage shooters to shed new light on their behavior. By examining what these offenders wrote or said about their desires for fame, and how this appears to correspond with their actions, it may be possible to glean new insights about their attempts to garner attention. As noted earlier, most

prior scholarship has cited the same three or four high-profile examples, so not much is known about offenders who share this motive.

In addition, the present study will explore the possibility that there are important differences between rampage shooters who made statements that revealed their desire for fame (the test group) and other rampage shooters (the control group). ANOVA and Chi-Square tests will help identify mean differences across several variables, such as age, sex, number of victims killed, and number of victims wounded. Data for the control group were drawn from the NYPD's statistics on offenders from 1966-2012 who caused at least two casualties, which is a common standard used by scholars studying these types of offenders (Lankford, 2013a; Newman et al., 2004). Statistical comparisons were limited to shooters within the United States, because although the NYPD report's coverage of domestic offenders may be nearly comprehensive, its collection of foreign cases is extremely limited (Kelly, 2012).

Results

Overall, twenty-four examples were found of fame-seeking rampage shooters, based on their explicit statements or admissions about this motive. Chronologically, they span the years of 1966-2015. Only one was female: 1979 San Diego school shooter Brenda Spencer. Table 1 presents evidence of fame-seeking offenders in the United States. Eighteen qualifying offenders were found. Table 2 presents evidence of fame-seeking rampage shooters in other countries. Six qualifying offenders were found. Of these, three were from Germany, one was from Australia, one was from Finland, and one was from Norway.

Year	Name	Comment
1966	Robert B. Smith	"I wanted to get known, just wanted to get myself a name" (Time, 1966).
1979	Brenda Spencer	Had previously "stated on occasion that she would be famous." Told friend, "Wait until Monday, and see what I'm going to do. It might even be big enough to make the news" (Langman, 2015a).
1992	Wayne Lo	In jail post-attack, "told [other inmates] 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, 2015a).
1997	Evan Ramsey	Initially planned to commit suicide, but then instead decided to kill others because as he explained, "[My friend] said that my face and name would go across the world. He said I'll become famous" (Newman et al., 2004).
1997	Luke Woodham	"It was not a cry for attention, it was not a cry for help. It was a scream in sheer agony saying that if I can't pry your eyes open, if I can't do it through pacifism, if I can't show you through displaying of intelligence, then I will do it with a bullet." "Wednesday 1, 1997 shall go down in history as the day I fought back" (Langman, 2015b).
1999	Eric Harris	"Isn't it fun to get the respect that we're going to deserve?" "We're going to kick-start a revolution." Discussed with co-attacker whether it would be better if Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino directed the film about them. Said he wanted it to have "a lot of foreshadowing and dramatic irony" (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

1999	Dylan Klebold	"The most deaths in U.S. history...We're hoping. We're hoping...Directors will be fighting over this story. I know we're gonna have followers." Discussed with co-attacker whether it would be better if Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino directed the film about them (Gibbs & Roche, 1999; Langman, 2015b).
1999	T.J. Solomon	Post-attack, told a psychiatrist that "he was thinking about Columbine, and how much media coverage the incident received, and about how much attention he might win if he followed suit" (Newman et al., 2004).
2006	Eric Hainstock	"No one ever listened...I want my story to be told and I'm willing to write about it...I want my story told. I want all the social service agency's to listen, the schools, the parents all over the state. My Myspace page has more info as well" (Langman, 2015b).
2006	Alvaro Castillo	"I am just putting the finishing touches on my autobiography. It is in my computer, in Microsoft Word...Today is the big day for Operation Columbine & 1st time that the world be reminded of Columbine!" (Langman, 2015b).
2007	Seung Hui Cho	"I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people... I set the example of the century for my Children to follow." Sent his self-made video and manifesto to NBC News (Hauser, 2007; Langman, 2015b).
2007	Robert Hawkins	"just think tho, I'm gonna be fuckin famous" (USA Today, 2007).
2011	Jared Lee Loughner	"I HAVE THIS HUGE GOAL AT THE END OF MY LIFE: 165 rounds fired in a minute!" "I'll see you on National T.v.!" (Associated Press, 2014)
2012	Adam Lanza	Was obsessed with rampage shooters and the attention they received, and referred to "my catalog of mass murderers." Participated in online debates about which was the "the most famous school shooting," and why. Also posted, "just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers...and beyond these fans are countless more people who can sympathize with them" (Langman, 2015b).
2014	Aaron Ybarra	Was previously arrested when he was drunk, suicidal, and lying in the middle of the road. At that time, he "asked cops to shoot him so he could become 'famous'" (Hastings, 2014).
2014	Elliot Rodger	"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...I never knew how to gain positive attention, only negative." Wrote 137 page autobiography and filmed himself in a series of videos that he posted to YouTube prior to his attack (New York Times, 2014).
2015	Vester Flanagan	Filmed his fatal attack and posted it online, then tweeted out the news from his own personal Twitter account: "I filmed the shooting see Facebook." Sent his 22-page suicide note directly to ABC News (Achenbach, 2015).
2015	Chris Harper Mercer	Wrote of rampage shooters, "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." (Miller, 2015).
Note: The citation Langman (2015b) refers to a collection of school shooters' notes and manifestos that were searched for relevant quotes.		

Table 2. Initial List of Mass Shooters outside the United States who Sought Fame		
Year	Name	Comment
1996	Martin Bryant (Australia)	"I'll do something that will make everyone remember me" (Inglis, 2008; Powell, 2007).
2002	Robert Steinhauser (Germany)	"I'm going to be really big one day." "Everybody will talk about me." Classmate recalled, "He was insubordinate in school, attracting attention. Students loved it...I remember that once he told me that one time he wanted everybody to know him and just be famous" (Langman, 2015a).
2006	Sebastian Bosse (Germany)	"Before I go, I will teach you a lesson, so that nobody will ever forget me again!...I want that my face will be burnt into your heads!...Because I know that the fascist police won't want to publish my videos, notebooks, diaries, basically anything, I took it into my own hands" (Langman, 2015b).
2007	Pekka-Eric Auvinen (Finland)	"hopefully my actions will inspire all the intelligent people of the world and start some sort of revolution" (Langman, 2015b).
2009	Tim Kretschmer (Germany)	"reportedly wanted people to notice him and talked about being famous" (Langman, 2015a).
2011	Anders Behring Breivik (Norway)	Wrote 1500 page manifesto and took glamour photos of himself pre-attack: "After years of work the first edition of the compendium '2083 – A European Declaration of Independence' is completed...I ask that you distribute this book to everyone you know" (Washington Post, 2011).
Note: The citation Langman (2015b) refers to a collection of school shooters' notes and manifestos that were searched for relevant quotes.		

Table 3 presents the results of the ANOVA and Chi-Square (X^2) tests. As a reminder, comparisons were made between rampage shooters in the United States who made statements that revealed their desire for fame (the test group; $N = 18$) and other rampage shooters in the United States (the control group; $N = 201$). There was not a significant difference in offender sex, because 94-96% of both the test and control groups were male. However, there was a significant difference in offender age at the $p < .001$ level: fame-seeking rampage shooters averaged 20.4 years old, while other rampage shooters averaged 34.5 years old. There were also major differences in the number of victims killed and wounded across groups. Fame-seeking rampage shooters killed an average of 7.2 victims, while the other offenders killed an average of 3.0 victims ($p < .001$). In turn, the fame-seeking rampage shooters wounded an average of 8.0 victims, while the other offenders wounded an average of 3.9 victims ($p < .01$).

	Rampage shooters w/ explicit evidence of fame-seeking	Other rampage shooters		
Variable	Mean (SD) N = 18	Mean (SD) N = 201	χ^2	F
offender age	20.39 (6.18)	34.51 (14.35)		17.08***
offender sex (% male)	0.94 (0.24)	0.96 (0.20)	0.19	
victims killed	7.22 (8.95)	3.04 (3.27)		17.89***
victims wounded	8.00 (7.93)	3.87 (6.24)		6.90**

Note: analysis restricted to rampage shooters in the United States.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results clearly show that fame-seeking as a motive for rampage shooting is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1966, Robert Benjamin Smith shot and killed five women at a small college in Arizona, and then explained to police that “I wanted to get known, just wanted to get myself a name” (Time, 1966). In fact, there were at least six offenders who acknowledged their fame-seeking motives prior to the Columbine shooters.

Notably, some of the fame-seekers did not leave behind suicide notes, manifestos, or videos. At first, this might seem confusing: why would a fame-seeker pass up the opportunity to share his or her thoughts with the world? In some cases, these offenders may have originally intended to leave a note or video behind, but then become consumed by other attack plans or changed their minds at the last moment. In other cases, they may have subscribed to the notion that “Actions Speak Louder Than Words.” It is important to recognize that their desire to be famous may not include any desire to voice their innermost thoughts or feelings, which could undermine the bold and powerful image that they commonly want to portray (Newman et al., 2004). Finally, in some cases, rampage shooters might have calculated that by saying less—and leaving behind a mystery about their motives for the public to struggle with—they could actually receive more attention and fame. For example, in an online post, 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter Adam Lanza voiced this exact perspective: “One of the major reasons why Columbine is still a (relatively) popular topic in recent years is because of the potential it allows for speculation. This would not exist if they had lived because their actual thoughts and experiences...would probably be well-known” (Langman, 2015b). Lanza appears to have followed this same strategy for fame: he intentionally destroyed his computer and deleted many of his online posts, and then committed suicide after his attack. As a result, there has been a tremendous amount of public and media speculation about his motives ever since.

In addition, the present study found significant differences between offenders who made statements that revealed their desire for fame and other offenders. On average, the rampage shooters who clearly sought fame were much younger than other rampage shooters. This appears consistent with prior research which shows that young people put a much higher priority on being famous than their older counterparts (Pew Research Center 2007; Schneider & Stevenson 1999; Twenge, 2014). This seems to make sense. When people are young, they are in a particularly aspirational stage of life, and much of who they are and what they can become is still yet to be determined. For example, at the extreme, it seems likely that a higher percentage of five-year olds dream that they might one day become President of the United States than the percentage of fifty-year olds who still have that dream. More broadly, many adolescents and young adults fantasize that fame will instantly get them everything they want: money, power, sex, love, respect, and an exciting career (Twenge, 2014). As they grow older, however, that fantasy may gradually wane, as both maturity and reality set in.

The present study also found that the rampage shooters who clearly sought fame killed and wounded more than twice as many victims as other rampage shooters did. This appears consistent with prior research which has shown a correlation between the amount of death and destruction offenders cause and the amount of attention they receive (Duwe, 2004, 2007). For example, Duwe's (2004) study of mass murder from 1976-1999 found that incidents covered by *The New York Times* averaged 23% more fatalities and 97% more injuries than the average mass murder during the same time period. This suggests that rampage shooters who want to be famous have a clear incentive to make their attacks as deadly as possible.

Empirical Predictions

Naturally, it is impossible to predict the future with anything close to complete certainty, and a variety of unforeseen variables can always arise and alter expected outcomes. However, given the previously reviewed research on trends in American culture and American media, along with the present study's findings, it is possible to make several empirical predictions about the frequency and characteristics of future rampage shootings.

Prediction #1: The number of fame-seeking rampage shooters will continue to grow.

As previously reviewed, prior research suggests that Americans are living in a time and place where (1) fame is increasingly desired and sought by young people, and (2) the distinction between being famous and being infamous has become increasingly blurred. Furthermore, (3) rampage shootings seem like the only way to guarantee instant fame for people without exceptional talent or luck, and (4) rampage shooters seem to receive more attention than in the past, given the exponential increase in internet media sites, blogs, podcasts, and social media commentaries.

This seems like a very dangerous confluence of factors and forces. Looking back, there already appears to have been an increase in the number of fame-seeking rampage shooters over time. The present study found very strong evidence of 1 fame-seeker in the 1960s, 1 in the 1970s, 0 in the 1980s, 7 in the 1990s, and 15 since 2000 (see Tables 1 and 2). If these social trends continue, and demands for fame and infamy continue to grow stronger, the number of fame-seeking rampage shooters may continue to grow as well.

This does not necessarily mean that the total number of rampage shooters will rise. At least in theory, the amount of non-fame-seeking offenders could increase, decrease, or stay the same. Interestingly enough, however, the apparent rise in fame-seeking offenders in recent decades coincides with indications that the total number of rampage or “active” shooters in the United States may have increased as well (Blair & Schweit, 2014; Kelly, 2012).

Prediction #2: Fame-seeking rampage shooters will attempt to kill more victims than past offenders killed.

Of additional concern is the likelihood that in the future, fame-seeking rampage shooters will try to top the number of victims killed by their predecessors. This is a frightening prospect, because it suggests that some of these offenders are directly competing with each other for fame. As previously reviewed, there appears to be a correlation between fatalities caused and media coverage received (Duwe, 2004). Unfortunately, the offenders themselves may recognize this, as the following pre-attack quotes from the Columbine shooters’ video suggest:

Klebold: The most deaths in U.S. history.

Harris: Hopefully.

Klebold: We’re hoping. We’re hoping. I hope we kill 250 of you...I can’t wait...

Harris: I hope people have flashbacks...Isn’t it fun to get the respect we’re going to deserve? We don’t give a shit because we’re going to die doing it (Langman, 2015b).

Although Harris and Klebold failed to kill as many as they intended, their attack was the worst school shooting in United States history at that time. Perhaps as a direct result, it was also the second-most media covered event of the 1990s, behind only the O.J. Simpson car chase (Muschert, 2002). The Columbine killers were not only made famous through the news, but also through popular culture: they have been commonly referenced in books, songs, television shows, documentary films, and the movies (Cullen, 2009; Muschert, 2002). Unfortunately, this was just what the perpetrators wanted.

More recently, before his 2011 attack, Arizona shooter Jared Lee Loughner wrote “I HAVE THIS HUGE GOAL AT THE END OF MY LIFE: 165 rounds fired in a minute!” Then he made his motives even clearer: “I’ll see you on National T.v.!” (Associated Press, 2014). Loughner ultimately shot 13 people before being tackled and subdued; otherwise he may have harmed even more.

Just seven months later, Norway shooter Anders Behring Breivik planted a bomb that killed 8 people, and then drove to a summer camp on the Utoya island where he launched a rampage shooting that killed 69 more. This tragic death count made Breivik the “record-holder” among mass shooters, and as a direct result, he received a tremendous amount of international media coverage (Lankford, 2013b). If his attack had been less deadly, it almost certainly would have been a smaller media story, and Breivik would have become less famous. Unfortunately, in the future, it seems likely that other rampage shooters will attempt to exceed Breivik’s total to obtain an even larger amount of fame.

Prediction #3: Fame-seeking rampage shooters will “innovate” new ways to get attention.

Killing many victims is one strategy offenders use to attract media attention, but it is not

their only option. In the future, fame-seeking rampage shooters may also attempt to get attention by choosing targets or attack methods that will make them seem new, different, or innovative.

There have already been numerous examples which show that this can work. Loughner, who bragged that he would be on national television, made international headlines because along with the random bystanders he attacked, he also shot United States Congresswoman Gabby Giffords. In turn, although no direct acknowledgements or admissions were found of 2012 Aurora shooter James Holmes' desires for fame, he clearly staged his attack in a dramatic manner that made it stand out. He not only targeted a movie theater, which was an unprecedented attack location, but he also specifically dyed his hair orange to mimic the comic book villain "the Joker," and he attacked on the first night of *The Dark Knight Rises's* highly anticipated release.

Another example comes from the Sandy Hook shooter. Lanza was obsessed with previous rampage shooters and the attention they received, and posted online about "my catalog of mass murderers" and "my favorite mass shooters" (Langman, 2015b). For more than two years, he was a regular contributor to an online forum where these attackers were idolized, and he participated in online debates about who the most famous school shooters were, and exactly why (Langman, 2015b). Lanza specifically recognized that fame among rampage shooters was a matter of competition. He was impressed by Norway attacker Breivik's ability to kill more than the previous record-holder from South Korea ("Someone finally outdid Woo Bum-kon"), but he observed that one shooter did not get as much attention as he deserved because "Robert Hawkins's shooting at the Westroads Mall overshadowed it," and that another school shooter "was ignored [by the media] because it happened on an Indian reservation" (Langman, 2015b). Lanza also posted, "just look at how many fans you can find for all different types of mass murderers...and beyond these fans are countless more people who can sympathize with them" (Langman, 2015b). He was clearly one of them, and it appears he wanted fans of his own. This may have directly affected his decision to target an elementary school for his rampage shooting, which was unprecedented at that time. As Lankford (2012) suggests, "Lanza may have realized that the only thing that generates more attention than killing random innocent adults is killing random innocent children."

Overall, it appears that fame-seeking rampage shooters have a powerful incentive to continue to attack in new and different ways. That creates a very difficult challenge for law enforcement officials, who cannot simply assume that future rampage shooters will adhere to the patterns of the past.

Conclusion

It has been often observed in prior research that some rampage shooters seek fame (Langman, 2015a; Lankford & Hakim, 2011; Lankford, 2013b; Larkin, 2009; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Newman et al., 2004; O'Toole, 2014). However, this aspect of their behavior does not appear to have ever been the focus of a scholarly study until now. To fill this gap in existing knowledge, the present study conducted a close analysis of fame-seeking rampage shooters and examined how they may differ from other offenders. Direct evidence was provided of twenty-four fame-seeking rampage shooters, based on their explicit statements or admissions about this motive. On average, these offenders were much younger than other rampage shooters, and they killed and wounded more than double the amount of victims.

The present study also found more fame-seeking rampage shooters in the United States than in any other country. This is not particularly surprising, given previous research which shows

that overall, America has a disproportionately high number of offenders (Kaplan, 2015; Lankford, 2015a). However, the proportion of fame-seeking rampage shooters in the United States appears to far exceed its share of total offenders. For instance, Lankford (2015a) found that the United States has approximately 31% of the world's offenders, but the present study's results indicate that the United States may have approximately 75% of the offenders who explicitly seek fame. This gap may be primarily attributable to cross-cultural differences in social premiums on fame. As reviewed earlier, a large body of literature suggests that fame is revered and sought more in America than anywhere else on the globe (Caufield, 2015; Gountas et al., 2012; Parnaby & Sacco, 2004; Pinsky & Young, 2008; Twenge, 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Sternheimer, 2011; Uhls & Greenfield 2011). And as past psychological studies have shown, people who prioritize extrinsic goals (such as fame, image, and money) instead of intrinsic goals appear particularly prone to anxiety, narcissism, and depression (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Nickerson et al., 2003). In rare and extreme cases, this may increase their propensity for lethal violence.

A concerning prospect for the future is that as American media and entertainment culture continue to be exported to foreign countries (Powers, 2003), they may be accompanied by more of this social idolization of fame and these types of rampage shooters. Larkin (2009) suggests that in particular, the Columbine school shooting had a powerful effect on certain at-risk individuals around the world, who viewed perpetrators Harris and Klebold as vigilante heroes, and thus may have been interested in the fame that could come from committing their own attacks. He specifically identifies rampage school shooters in Argentina, Canada, Finland, and Germany who imitated or referenced the Columbine killers (Larkin, 2009). Similarly, Polland and Rosenberg (2011) emphasize the discovery by police investigators that 2011 Brazilian mass shooter Wellington Menezes de Oliveira appeared to have been copying the 2007 Virginia Tech killer. Looking ahead, in a world that has been made functionally smaller by advances in technology and communications (Friedman, 2005), the threat of fame-seeking rampage shooters may grow increasingly globalized.

Along these lines, based on its analysis of this type of offender and the relevant social trends, the present study has offered three empirical predictions. (1) The number of fame-seeking rampage shooters will continue to grow. (2) Fame-seeking rampage shooters will attempt to kill more victims than past offenders killed. (3) Fame-seeking rampage shooters will "innovate" new ways to get attention. Whether these predictions are borne out by the future data remains to be seen. However, one social change that could potentially disrupt the growth of this threat would be a major reversal in the way the media covers these attackers. Recently, there has been some support for movements such as "No Notoriety" and "Don't Name Them," which encourage media organizations to avoid giving rampage shooters the attention and fame they often seek (Baddour, 2015; Stelter, 2015). These campaigns seem to be a step in the right direction, but there are still major questions about which specific strategies might be effective at deterring future attackers, and what the social costs might be if information about rampage shooters is not publicly shared. Ultimately, additional research on both the behavior of fame-seeking rampage shooters and the potential costs and benefits of proposed countermeasures would be of considerable value.

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