Chapter 6
The Characteristics and Typologies of School Violence Perpetrators

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ABSTRACT
Incidents of school related shootings have been intensely studied, particularly since the Columbine shooting on April 20, 1999, with the goal of creating a profile of school shooter. In light of the intense media frenzy created by school shootings and the shooters information as to cause and motivations of these events have not been accurately conveyed. What we know thus far is violent video games as a cause of school shootings is a myth. We also know that despite the fear of a school shooting, these are statistically rare events with perpetrators rarely surviving the attacks. Based on studies of the limited number of perpetrators, common psychological characteristics have been linked to those that have committed these acts.

INTRODUCTION
April 20, 1999, violence shattered the serenity of the affluent, predominantly white community of Littleton, Colorado. Two young students attending Columbine High School, Eric Harris (19 years of age) and Dylan Klebold (17 years of age), proceeded to engage in an unprecedented shooting rampage that left twelve students and one teacher dead, 23 injured and a nation in utter disbelief (Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares & Espelage, 2011; Coleman, 2002). The two gunmen also perished in the attack as part of a double suicide. After the attack police found the video manifesto of Klebold and Harris that chronicled not only their elaborate plan to attack the school but also why they were committing the crime, in their own words. In the video, Klebold and Harris talk of the persecution they felt from others, taunts and teasing by the jocks and “popular students” at the high school, and compared the impending attack to the computer game Doom (Coleman, 2002).

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As the media followed the events unfolding at the high school information about the shooters began to emerge followed by questions that, to this day, have yet to be answered despite the videotaped confessions of Klebold and Harris. The shooters were two young white males, students attending the high school, from professedly stable, intact families that were considered to be of higher socioeconomic status. The boys identified themselves and socialized with others as part of the subculture of the Trenchcoat Mafia (Coleman, 2002). The events of that day began our society’s newfound awareness, fear and concern for school rampage shootings. More than a decade later we are still trying to make sense of the tragedy that unfolded at Columbine High School and other school rampage shooting events that have transpired since that day at Columbine.

Almost eight years later to the day, April 16, 2007, a lone gunman, Seung Hui Cho (“Cho”) aged 23, engaged in what, at that time, became one of the deadliest shooting rampages in American history. The attack took place on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (commonly referred to as “Virginia Tech”) leaving 32 people dead, and 17 students injured (Hauser, 2007; Potter, Schoetz, Esposito, Thomas, 2007). The gunman in the attack also perished from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The attack was determined by law enforcement to be a random spree shooting, law enforcement determined that there were no specific targets, by a gunman known to be a loner suffering from mental health issues. Similar to the Columbine shooters, Cho left behind a written manifesto as well as video of verbal ranting’s about his experiences of being bullied and his vision of himself as a vindicator for all those like him that have been bullied by others. Interestingly, Cho references the Columbine shooters, Klebold and Harris, in his video as martyrs (Breed, 2007). The nation was once again left shocked and horrified by the incident at Virginia Tech. The event, like Columbine and others before, further confirmed that schools were vulnerable to violence and must be prepared to protect those on our school campuses from such seemingly random acts of violence.

December 14, 2012 yet another rampage shooting by a lone gunman, 20 year old Adam Lanza, in Newtown, Connecticut again demonstrated that schools, even elementary schools, were vulnerable to violent attacks. The attack on Sandy Hook Elementary School (“Sandy Hook”) left the nation in shock and disbelief as the media revealed the victims of the shooting to be 20 elementary school students, ages 6 and 7 years old, and 6 adults, teachers and administrators, working at Sandy Hook. Reports of the attack not only gave us the horrific accounts of the actions of the shooter but also the heroic acts on behalf of the teachers trying to save the lives of their young students. As the death toll continued to rise, we learned that Lanza, who also died in the attack from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, took the life of his own mother, now known to be his first victim. To date, it is not clear what led Adam Lanza to engage in a homicidal rampage. What we do know is that Adam suffered from mental health issues, Asperger’s Syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as a fascination with guns and violent video games (Ziv, 2014; Solomon, 2014).

While these are clearly not the only rampage shootings that have occurred in the United States they are reminders and warnings that these horrific school shooting events can occur in any and all school settings – elementary school through college (Flannery, Modzeleski & Kretschmar, 2013). Rampage shootings such as Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook are statistically rare events yet the media attention received is extensive (Id.). For example, at the time of the Columbine shooting, President Bill Clinton had been at the center of a media storm regarding his impeachment. Columbine quickly became the center of the media’s attention reporting every piece of information that could be gathered regarding