

The “Pseudocommando” Mass Murderer: Part II, The Language of Revenge

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In Part I of this article, research on pseudocommandos was reviewed, and the important role that revenge fantasies play in motivating such persons to commit mass murder-suicide was discussed. Before carrying out their mass shootings, pseudocommandos may communicate some final message to the public or news media. These communications are rich sources of data about their motives and psychopathology. In Part II of this article, forensic psycholinguistic analysis is applied to clarify the primary motivations, detect the presence of mental illness, and discern important individual differences in the final communications of two recent pseudocommandos: Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech) and Jiverly Wong (Binghamton, NY). Although both men committed offenses that qualify them as pseudocommandos, their final communications reveal striking differences in their psychopathology.

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What if . . . humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak? [Ref. 1, p 61]

Hempel *et al.* were among the first to note that mass murderers with a “warrior mentality” may “convey their central motivation in a psychological abstract, a phrase or sentence yelled with great emotion at the beginning of the mass murder” (Ref. 2, p 213). To date, the actual communications of pseudocommando mass murderers have received little analysis, even though “the words people use . . . can reveal important aspects of their social and psychological worlds” (Ref. 3, p 547). A subject’s use of language may also suggest different types of mental illness and may lend clues about his past history, ethnic background, and primary motivations.

In this article, I examine the final communications of two pseudocommando mass murderers in an effort to reveal the themes that emerge and whether such communications can lead to deeper insights into the psychology and motivations of the offenders. Such analyses begin with the assumption that the

offender would not have bothered to write or communicate his “manifesto” unless it had great personal meaning. In the cases that will be examined, both offenders took the time and effort to craft and then deliver their communications to television news media, suggesting that they believed their communications contained important information for others.

If we accept the working hypothesis that these communications are highly meaningful to the pseudocommando, we may examine them for what they reveal about his motives, psychological state, and a wealth of other data. Through careful forensic psycholinguistic analysis, it is possible to discern personality variables, cognitive styles, and the presence of certain types of mental illness.⁴ Analysis may also suggest important information, such as educational level, religious orientation, and cultural background. Psychiatrists are in a unique position to analyze written communications for different forms of mental illness, such as schizophrenia,⁵ depression,⁶ and other types of emotional turmoil. For example, it has been suggested that the excessive use of pronouns is associated with high levels of psychological distress.⁷ The use of metaphor or metonymy may also contain clues about an individual’s history, ethnic background, primary motivations, and level of distress.⁸ Data as seemingly inconsequential as an e-mail address may suggest clues about personality structure.⁹

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A psycholinguistic study of threatening persons from the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) database found that “higher conceptual complexity” and “lower ambivalent hostility/paranoia” were more strongly associated with predatory violence.¹⁰

Before proceeding with the analyses of the final communications of Seung-Hui Cho and Jiverly Wong, a few points related to ethics, objectivity, and limitations are in order. The forensic psychiatrist’s objectivity may be called into question if the expert gives an opinion without first performing a personal examination in cases that require one.¹¹ To be clear, this analysis does not constitute an expert opinion. Rather, it is a linguistic exercise that attempts to gain a deeper understanding of these offenders’ psychology from materials available in the public domain. The psycholinguistic analyses herein should be viewed as working hypotheses. In addition, the analyses are obviously limited by the lack of personal evaluation, as well as other confidential collateral sources.

The Principles of Medical Ethics With Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry, § 7.3 (i.e., the Goldwater Rule) states that “a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general.”¹² The intent of this article is to explore, via public-domain writings, the general psychology and motivations of Mr. Cho and Mr. Wong. I refrain from offering a professional opinion about specific diagnoses; rather, I offer limited and broad hypotheses about their motives and psychopathology.

Seung-Hui Cho

On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Tech, shot to death 33 students and faculty.¹³ He wounded 24 more and then committed suicide by shooting himself. The incident was an unfathomable tragedy for the surviving college students, their families, and the entire country. The Virginia Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted an investigation, finding that Mr. Cho did not significantly raise any concerns until approximately December 2005.¹⁴ At that time, he was perceived as threatening and odd by peers and faculty. He was seen several times by the campus police when other students complained that he had harassed them. On December 13, 2005, campus police told him that his continuing acts of harassment could lead

to criminal charges in the future. That same day, Mr. Cho sent an instant message to a roommate stating, “I might as well kill myself or something,” and “everybody just hates me.”¹⁵ This comment ultimately resulted in an evaluation of Mr. Cho by a social work clinician. The evaluation led to an overnight stay in a psychiatric facility. The evaluation noted social anxiety and possible depressive symptoms, but no evidence of psychosis was detected.

The following day, he was evaluated by a psychologist who found him to be mentally ill, but not an imminent danger to himself or others. Several hours later, he was released with an appointment at a counseling center for later that day, December 14, 2005. At that appointment, he denied having any suicidal or homicidal ideas and said that his suicidal statement had been a “joke.” Although he was encouraged to return for follow-up in January, no appointment was scheduled. There were no further incidents reported by the OIG investigation until the shootings on April 16, 2007. It may be theorized that before and after his evaluation he was having violent revenge fantasies. This possibility is deduced primarily from several plays that he wrote for class that contained themes of gratuitous violence and revenge.¹⁶ The OIG investigation reported that after Mr. Cho’s psychiatric evaluation, his peers described him as isolative and rarely making eye contact. He would usually not respond if spoken to or would simply give one-word answers. His peers reported not observing any evidence of confused thinking, odd behavior, or agitation. He appeared mildly sad, yet he was known for not showing much emotion. Most of his peers said they never really knew him.

On the day of the shootings, NBC received a package containing Mr. Cho’s 1,800-word video manifesto on CD, plus 43 photographs. To say that Mr. Cho had prepared for the shootings would be an understatement. The preparatory stage appeared to reach its zenith during the crafting of his manifesto. The process involved his taking photographs of himself dressed in several warrior outfits, while striking threatening poses. Eleven of the photographs were of Mr. Cho aiming handguns at the camera.¹⁷ In one dramatic photograph, he is holding a handgun in each hand with his arms spread wide. He is wearing a military-style vest for carrying ammunition, and a large knife is strapped to his belt as he stares menacingly into the camera. In two other photographs, Mr. Cho appears to be mimicking suicidal behavior. In

one, he points a handgun at his right temple. In the other, he holds a large hunting knife to the left side of his neck.

Mr. Cho's Communications

The following is an analysis of select revelatory excerpts, as space limitations do not permit commentary on the manifesto in its entirety.^{18,19} Let us begin by considering his admonishment:

You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today.¹⁷

The phrase “chances and ways” suggests that until the day of the shootings, he viewed himself as keeping a “running tally” of mistreatments and “failed opportunities” for others to set things right. The strong element of externalization of blame is self-evident and continues with the sentence:

But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off.¹⁷

He does not assign just some blame to his victims, but every bit of it. Self-righteous rage is thus justified by projecting all blame “until it appeared to reside only in the other” (Ref. 20, p 1234). He portrays himself as blame free and even benevolent, having given innumerable “chances” to his victims. The blood of the victims, he chastises, will torment “them” like Lady Macbeth. This reveals a fantasy that the devalued others will remain tormented by a traumatic guilt that can “never” be alleviated. The severity of Mr. Cho's pathological self-concept is suggested by the fact that portraying himself as blame-free was not enough. His ego was so impoverished that it required more—that he be a “heroic” sacrifice to “save” the weak. Thus, he becomes not merely “all good,” but actually God-like:

Thanks to you, I die like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the weak and the defenseless people. . . . If not for me, for my children and my brothers and sisters that you (expletive). I did it for them.¹⁷

The expression “my children” is interesting in that Mr. Cho was not known to have fathered any children. His statement may suggest that he is further extending the Christ metaphor in a grandiose way. (This assumes that he did not delusionally believe he had fathered children, and there is no available evidence to suggest that he had such a delusion.) He ominously acknowledges wanting to “inspire” others, a phenomenon noted by Mullen,²¹ who found

that pseudocommandos who were captured alive referred to other infamous cases of mass murder.

Strikingly, Mr. Cho realized he had other options. Unfortunately, he had become too deeply invested in his revenge romance:

I didn't have to do it. I could have left. I could have fled. But now I am no longer running.¹⁷

That he states with finality that he is “no longer running” may be viewed as evidence that he had not only reached the oblitative state of mind, but also that he was no longer able to defend against the aversive self-awareness he had been running from for so long. His actions had already brought him close to an extended involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. His behavior after his mental health evaluation suggests he withdrew profoundly, as he was now aware of the consequences should he act out again. Further, one alternative to rage over unmet needs is to become remote.²⁰ While the needs of his ego were still present, an isolative withdrawal would give him a dulled or deadened quality.²⁰ Thus, after his 2005 evaluation and release, he was alone with his thoughts, which probably consisted of rumination over the “hundred billion” injustices he perceived himself as having endured. For refuge, he had the pleasurable fantasy of becoming a heroic avenger of the weak and the defenseless. In contrast to his fantasy of being an all-good hero, others are portrayed as having committed heinous, sadistic acts against him:

You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscience. You thought it was one pathetic boy's life you were extinguishing.¹⁷

The metaphors used here are extremely powerful and portray others as having targeted his innermost self for cruel and traumatic persecution, suggesting the strength of his persecutory cognitions. His use of the term “pathetic boy” signifies his own threadbare self-esteem. It was not necessary for him to include this descriptor, yet he does. Indeed, this is one of the only points in his manifesto by which he (perhaps inadvertently) reveals to others his own fragility and fears about his own self-worth.²² For the most part, his communications consist of scathing, acerbic attacks designed to denigrate the “others” and maximize their guilt. He then assigns motive to their persecution—their own “amusement” and sheer enjoyment of exercising power over him:

Do you know what it feels like to dig your own grave? . . . Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and be impaled upon a cross and left to bleed to death for your

amusement? You have never felt a single ounce of pain your whole life. And you want to inject as much misery in our lives . . . just because you can.¹⁷

These accusations are interesting because they involve the concept of death, specifically his death, and suggest that the idea of death was present in Mr. Cho’s ruminations. Going a step further, these communications may suggest that he felt, affectively, existentially, or even delusionally, that he was already dead. The comparison to the heroic Christ figure is again present in his remarks about being impaled on a cross, as well as an extreme degree of splitting in his assertion that his victims had never felt “a single ounce” of pain. Note, too, the phrase “our lives,” which is consistent with his earlier statements that he believes he is not alone in his victimhood. Yet there is no evidence, in reality, that he was ever able to connect with a group of disaffected, unhappy individuals. Thus, he creates this group from whole cloth, as it bolsters his hero fantasy, and provides comfort via the notions that there is strength in numbers and he does not suffer alone.

The following statements give the best insight into Mr. Cho’s paranoid-schizoid dynamics:

You had everything you wanted. Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund wasn’t enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs. You had everything. . . .¹⁷

He bitterly declares that the “best” things in life were in the possession of the persecutory others. “They” had access to all of life’s goodness and pleasure. He also states this with considerable derision, due to his perception that they had access to an endless amount of goodness (hedonistic fulfillments), and yet it was still not “enough” for them. But his attempt to disparage the others’ access to goodness is easily seen as a diaphanous veil covering his overwhelming feelings of envy, as is evidenced clearly by his later statement:

Oh the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists, being counted as one of you, if only you didn’t [expletive] the living [expletive] out of me.¹⁷

In this rueful statement, he reveals his true desire: to be accepted socially, which also has taken on the meaning to him of gaining access to “hedonistic” levels of enjoyment in life. But the very group of others who seemed to possess such goodness was the group subjecting him to extreme persecution. Returning to Kleinian theory, at the paranoid-schizoid

developmental stage, the subject may often take the view that if the wished-for goodness is not forthcoming, it must necessarily be the case that it is being purposely withheld.²³ For why else would they not be generous with their goodness, unless the deprivation was a purposeful act of withholding? This deprivation is viewed as providing the other with sadistic gratification.

Clinical experience and Kleinian theory suggest that the development of feelings of gratitude and some desire to repair the damage done to the other is the route out of the destructive path of envy.²⁴ Mr. Cho may have attempted to engage in some reparative (i.e., creative) activities via writing plays.¹⁶ However, these writings were saturated with destructive, violent themes, suggesting that this route may have been closed off to him at the time. Indeed, he puts it most plainly that he has reached a point of no return, the oblitative state of mind: “When the time came, I did it. I had to.” Finally, his time spent in violent fantasy and chronic embitterment had the effect of intensifying his revenge desires:

All the [expletive] you’ve given me. Right back at you with hollow points.¹⁷

The hollow-point is a special variety of bullet that is “more devastating, producing a larger and more irregular wound track” than most other bullet types (Ref. 25, p 371). Thus, Mr. Cho is indicating that he is responding with overkill: an eye for an eye has been transmuted into many lives lost as compensation for a wounded ego.

Jiverly Wong

Jiverly Wong was a 41-year-old Vietnamese immigrant living in New York State. On April 3, 2009, he burst into the American Civic Association in Binghamton, New York, carrying two handguns and wearing body armor. Before entering, he used his father’s car to block off the back door, the building’s only other exit. In the very place where he had been taking English classes, he proceeded to kill 13 people before shooting himself. He was equipped with “large amounts of ammunition, and he had held permits since approximately 1996 for the two guns he used (Zikuski J, Binghamton Police Chief, personal communication, April 4, 2009). Local law enforcement investigation quickly discovered that the mass murder was not at all surprising to those who knew Mr. Wong (Zikuski J).

Mr. Wong had immigrated to New York with his family in 1990. He was the second of four children in an ethnically Chinese family that had lived in Vietnam. His father reported that, not long after they moved to the United States, his son told him “someone was trying to kill him.”²⁶ Mr. Wong was approximately 22 years old at the time and complained to his father of what may have been visual hallucinations or paranoid delusions of someone trying to harm him. He willingly went to the hospital with his father, where he was evaluated and released after a short period without treatment or follow-up. Retrospectively, Mr. Wong’s father wondered if his son’s lack of treatment may have been due to a communication barrier, as both he and his son spoke little English. Mr. Wong became an American citizen in 1995, but left the country shortly afterward. He returned in 1999 to California where he was married and divorced. He was in poor contact with his family during his 15 years in California, refusing to share his mailing address with them.

After losing his job as a truck driver in California, Mr. Wong moved back to New York to live with his parents in 2007. His parents noticed significant changes in him; he did not care to have friends and barely spoke to anyone.²⁶ Other changes seemed more peculiar. Even in the hot New York summer, he never wore short sleeves. He always emerged from the bathroom after a shower fully dressed in long sleeves and long pants. Next, were several incidents of aggression directed toward his family that seemed out of character. In 2008, Mr. Wong slapped his younger sister across the face during an argument and raised his voice inappropriately to his father in a relatively minor household dispute.

After being laid off from his job at a vacuum cleaner plant in November 2008, Mr. Wong began attending classes at the American Civic Association to improve his English. He was a gun enthusiast who spent his weekends target shooting.²⁷ Law enforcement would later discover that he fired an unusually high number of rounds at the range (Zikuski J). The post-tragedy investigation would also uncover that Mr. Wong exercised at a local gym, where he was described as performing only one exercise, a hand-and grip-strengthening exercise (Zikuski J). A co-worker at the vacuum cleaner plant reported that Mr. Wong sometimes joked about shooting politicians (Zikuski J). People in his local community believed he may have been upset about not being able to ob-

tain work. There were also unverified reports that he may have had a criminal record dating back to 1999, which involved planning a bank robbery and using cocaine (Zikuski J). In the two weeks leading up to the tragedy, his father noted that he stopped eating dinner, stopped watching television, and became even more isolated.²⁶ At approximately that time he composed the letter that he sent to *News 10 Now*, at a Syracuse television station.

Mr. Wong’s Communications

According to survivors who were present at the time of the shooting, Mr. Wong did not speak before opening fire (Zikuski J). Several days after the tragedy, an envelope was received by *News 10 Now*. The package contained a two-page handwritten letter, a gun permit, his driver’s license, and photographs of Mr. Wong smiling while holding handguns. Although the letter was dated March 18, 2009, it was postmarked April 3, 2009, suggesting that he had been planning the shootings for a significant period. The letter was written in all capital letters and contained numerous errors in spelling and grammar. An analysis and commentary on selected excerpts follows.

I am Jiverly Wong shooting the people.²⁸

This is the opening sentence of Mr. Wong’s letter, and its purpose is clear: to give him the credit and call attention to a very important message that he wants disseminated. Throughout the letter, there are several sentences that seem somewhat perplexing, in that their tone is incongruous with the overall theme and purpose of the letter. Consider the fact that he is writing a letter explaining why he will be killing people and how he believes he has been severely persecuted, yet at the same time he makes statements such as the following:

The first I want to say sorry I know a little English I hope you understand all of this. . . . Please continue second page thank you. . . . And you have a nice day.²⁸

These statements are strikingly courteous and seem entirely incongruous with the emotional tone of the rest of the letter. There are several possibilities that may explain his tone, all of which remain speculative. The courteousness may represent a cultural phenomenon manifesting in his limited English-writing skills. The incongruousness or inappropriateness may also suggest the inappropriate affect or emotions sometimes seen in major psychotic disor-

ders. A final possibility is simple sarcasm and mockery, as when Atlanta mass murderer Mark Barton said in his final communication, “I hope this doesn’t ruin your trading day.”²⁹ However, given the sincere, straightforward tone observed in the rest of his letter, the possibility of sarcasm seems less likely for all but the last statement, which appears at the very end of the letter.

Mr. Wong’s letter gets right to the point from the beginning:

Of course you need to know why I shooting? Because undercover cop gave me a lot of ass during eighteen years.²⁸

He bluntly answers the question he knew would be on everyone’s mind: Why? His answer: relentless persecution. He believes that he has been severely harassed and abused for almost two decades. Throughout his letter, he refers to his persecutor as an “undercover” cop. In real life, undercover officers are difficult to identify. They could be anybody, anywhere, at any time, as it is their purpose to remain undetected by the individual they are pursuing. Of special import is that the period of 18 years places the beginning of his perceived persecution at about the same time he first told his father he feared for his life and appeared to experience psychotic symptoms. The early 20s is commonly observed to be the age at which major psychotic disorders begin and typically is the time associated with a first break in schizophrenia.³⁰ As the letter continues, it becomes more apparent that Mr. Wong was having severe persecutory delusions:

Let talk about when I live in California. . . . Cop used 24 hours the technique of ultramodern and camera for burn the chemical in my house. For switch the channel Ti Vi. For adjust the fan. For made me unbreathable. For made me vomit. For connect the music into my ear.²⁸

Mr. Wong appears to describe classic persecutory delusions of technology. Delusions of a technical content (e.g., “ultramodern camera,” control of electrical devices in the house) have been reported to occur with greater frequency in men than in women.³¹ The possibility of olfactory hallucinations may be considered due to his complaint of burning chemicals in his house. The possibility of auditory hallucinations is raised by his complaint that his persecutor caused him to hear music in his ear. While such hallucinations are typically seen in psychotic disorders, the phenomenon of olfactory hallucinations and auditory hallucinations of music may sometimes be seen in certain seizure disorders, such as temporal

lobe epilepsy.^{32,33} It is difficult to say whether his perceptions of his fan and television represented hallucinations or paranoid delusions of reference. His statement about being “unbreathable” is curious and raises the question of anxiety and panic-like symptoms, possibly associated with his delusions of being poisoned by “burning chemicals.” Regardless, it is clear that he felt persecuted and under “24-hour” surveillance. The same delusional theme, persecution by an “undercover cop,” persists throughout the letter:

[When I lived in NY] . . . it terrible. . . . Cop wait until midnight when I off the light and went to the bed. Cop unlock my door and came in take a sit in my room. . . on the thirteen time had three time touch me when I sleeping.²⁸

This passage suggests that his persecutory delusions took on a more threatening and invasive nature. His persecutor is no longer harassing him from a distance, but has actually invaded his personal space. This change may represent a more severe decompensation of ego functioning: his persecutor has metaphorically broken through his fragmented defenses. Because of his deficient English, it is difficult to discern conclusively whether he meant to say that the cop entered his room and sat down, or the cop defecated (“take a sit”) in his room. The former implies a menacing and brazen invasion of privacy, while the latter adds an element of outrageous degradation. Also note that his persecutor has progressed to the level of actually touching him. These more invasive, threatening delusions suggest a worsening of his illness, and evidence of this worsening continues over time. For example, the following statement: “One time [cop] stolen 20 dollar in my wallet. One time used electric gun shoot at the behind my neck,”²⁸ indicates a continuation of his invasive, highly persecutory delusions.

It also appears as though Mr. Wong believed that there was a collaboration or conspiracy between the “undercover cop” in California, and the one in New York: “Many time from 1990 to 1997. . . . Spread a rumor nasty like the California Cop.”²⁸ He made other statements suggesting that he believed these rumors caused him terrible misfortune, such as losing his job and being treated poorly by others. Feelings of cultural marginalization associated with paranoid delusion also appear to have played a role. For example, he states, “. . . one time Cop leave a massage in my voice mail and said [come back your country].”²⁸ Finally, we see that he has reached the obliterative

state of mind, as evidenced by the last lines of his letter:

. . . I cannot accepted my poor life. Before I cut my poor life I must oneself get a judge job for make an impartial with undercover Cop by at least two people with me go to return to the dust of Earth. Already impartial now. . . . Cop bring about this shooting. Cop must [be held] responsible.²⁸

Like Mr. Cho, he reveals briefly his own decimated self-esteem (his “poor life”). However, unlike Mr. Cho, he does not take the route of turning his plans and actions into a heroic revenge fantasy. Rather, he simply puts forth his nihilistic state of mind and desire for revenge. After enduring more persecution than he can tolerate, he is unable to envision that his life will ever be different. He believes that his life is a “poor” one, suggesting aversive self-awareness, and the only escape he is able to conceive of is suicide. However, he has been horribly mistreated, and his suicide alone would leave an unjust lack of “balance” (“impartial,” i.e., fair or unbiased).³⁴ Thus, a vengeful judgment must be passed. Or in his words, his persecutor “must” be held “responsible.” But his persecutor(s) are “undercover,” and cannot be identified. A substitute group must be chosen. He leaves us with a message that might be reformulated as: “I want others to hurt like I do—maybe then my persecutors will be held responsible.”

There are two unanswered questions in the case of Mr. Wong: why did he choose the American Civic Center, and why did he kill 13 people when he gives the more modest number of “at least two” in his letter? His choice of the American Civic Center may be the missing expression of envy, one that he simply failed to allude to in his letter. Immigrants learning English at the Civic Center may have represented his lost hope for success in the United States. His envy of others who were achieving what he had so desperately wanted may have been a driving force in his choice to “destroy” those he saw as potentially enjoying this goal. Finally, it may be that because of his language skills and cultural background, his letter did not communicate the full extent of the rage and hostility he had been harboring. Thus, while he writes about killing “at least two” people, he brought with him more than enough ammunition to kill that many and more (Zikuski J). The police investigation found that Mr. Wong had been able to fire an unusually high number of rounds in a very brief time and with startling accuracy (Zikuski J). It may be speculated that he could have killed in excess of 13,

but chose to shoot himself when he heard approaching police sirens. It is also possible that from the time he authored his letter until the time he performed the shootings (two weeks later), his violent revenge fantasy was intensified by isolative rumination. Thus, “at least two” began to grow in number, and the phrasing “at least” seems to foreshadow this outcome.

Discussion

Both Mr. Cho and Mr. Wong committed mass murder as defined by the present-day Bureau of Justice definition. Both killed four or more victims at one location, within one event. Both men followed the pattern of the pseudocommando, in that they were heavily armed, wore warrior gear, committed the act during the day, planned for the act, and expected to be killed. The final communications of both men also revealed that they harbored strong emotions of anger, feelings of persecution, and severely damaged self-esteem. Both willingly plunged into death and destruction in pursuit of revenge. Both had reached the oblitative mindset in which nothing matters, and violent annihilation must be the final outcome.

It is in analyzing their final communications that the striking differences between the two are revealed. Mr. Wong’s final letter strongly suggests that he had a major psychotic disorder. Even more weight is added to this possibility by his father’s report of psychotic symptoms beginning in Mr. Wong’s early 20s. Although he was resentful about the status of his “poor life,” he attributed all his misfortunes to a bizarre, delusional persecution by an “undercover cop.” In effect, his invisible persecutor(s) (his psychotic illness) had destroyed his chances of assimilating and working successfully in the country to which he had immigrated. For approximately two decades, Mr. Wong had felt that he had been subjected to cruel and humiliating harassment. Upon reaching the oblitative state of mind, he reasoned that he would no longer be the passive recipient of persecution. Instead, he would assume the role of persecutor and punishing “judge.” In his case, we see much less overt envy expressed in his final communication. Rather, his letter dwells mainly on his persecutory delusions and his plan to commit homicide-suicide because of his aversive self-awareness (i.e., his “unacceptable,” “poor life”).

In contrast, Mr. Cho’s final communications afford a clear view into the psychodynamics of envy and social exclusion. He goes so far as to acknowledge his desire to be part of the “hedonistic” crowd that he imagined had unlimited access to life’s pleasures. His manifesto does not contain any overtly delusional thoughts, although one may argue that his feelings of persecution may have reached delusional or near-delusional levels. However, with Mr. Cho, there is no evidence of bizarre or technological delusions, and his mental health evaluations of 2005 did not find any psychotic symptoms. Rather, his letter is rife with externalization, splitting, and rage flowing from his feelings of social exclusion. His letter also contains more direct and overt expression of vitriolic anger than does Mr. Wong’s letter. But perhaps the biggest difference is Mr. Cho’s grandiose view of his act as a “heroic sacrifice.” He stresses that his own death will not be in vain, as he is sacrificing himself to “save” the “weak and the defenseless.” This theme hints at the way he saw himself, as a “pathetic boy” whose life (and self-esteem) had been “extinguished” by his feelings of social exclusion.

A final contrast between the two is obvious in the photographs that they sent to the media. Whereas the photographs sent by Mr. Wong consisted mainly of him sitting down and holding a gun pointed upward, Mr. Cho’s were more numerous and clearly posed for dramatic impact. In sum, Mr. Cho’s photos suggest substantially more drama and grandiosity, as well as suicidal cognitions. These data, taken together with the writings, suggest that Mr. Wong’s primary pathology may have been a major psychotic disorder (along with a possible depressive disorder), whereas Mr. Cho’s primary psychopathology may have been characterological (along with depressive and anxiety spectrum disorders). I do not mean to exclude the possibility that Mr. Cho had begun to have a thought disorder; however, the evidence for such a disorder is far less striking than for Mr. Wong.

Prevention

The unpleasant truth is that such events are extremely hard to prevent.³⁵ Recommendations may represent hopeful or idealistic goals, while the reality is that such events may occur without obvious opportunities for deterrence. Retrospectively, one may sometimes discover windows of opportunity that if taken advantage of, could have diverted the course of events leading up to the tragedy. Family members or

social contacts can take steps to have the potential pseudocommando evaluated and treated, or if appropriate, involuntarily treated. Employees or coworkers can notify authorities or supervisors once they become reasonably concerned. Third parties can have direct or indirect pre-offense knowledge of the perpetrator’s intentions, threats, or troubling behavior. Thus, perhaps one hope of prevention ultimately falls to third parties who possess knowledge about the individual’s behavior.³⁶ We live in a society that places a high value on privacy, individual liberty, and safety. These priorities may be difficult to balance at times, yet in the case of an individual who raises the concern of family, friends, or coworkers, it seems that the privacy end of the equation must remain flexible, albeit in a carefully reasoned way.

Other preventive factors may include the media, legislation, and sensitivity to acculturation. The media, it may be argued, has a duty to report such incidents in a way that does not grant the perpetrator the power of achieving his goal of sensationalized infamy, which may in turn influence others. Thus, it may be helpful for the media to consider a formalized set of reporting guidelines. For example, it has been suggested that the news media should avoid glorifying the perpetrator and not disclose his methods or the number of victims killed.³⁷ Instead, the media should emphasize victim and community recovery efforts and deflect attention from the perpetrator.

Countries with less stringent gun control laws have been observed to have a higher risk of mass murder than countries with stricter laws.³⁸ One Australian observational study compared mass murders before and after 1996, the year of a widely publicized mass murder in Tasmania.³⁹ Australia quickly enacted gun law reforms that included removing semi-automatic, pump-action shotguns and rifles from civilian possession. In the 18 years before the gun laws, the Australian authors reported 13 mass shootings. In the 10.5 years after the gun law reforms, there were none.

Finally, cultural differences must be taken into consideration, especially when there is the potential for an immigrant to develop strong feelings of social exclusion. In vulnerable individuals, intense “acculturative stress” may result in strong feelings of “marginalization” (Ref. 40, p 737). In transcultural psychiatry, the concept of marginalization is not dissimilar from the psychological construct of social exclusion. That is, there is the potential for the mar-

ginalized individual to develop feelings of rejection, alienation, and, in some instances, to form a hostile, negative identity. Improving mental health access in immigrant communities to clinicians with competence in transcultural psychiatry may serve a preventive role in select cases. Other steps may involve identifying communities in which it is more difficult to access adequate mental health services and improving nationwide research efforts that are focused on identifying and preventing such tragedies.

Conclusions

Before carrying out mass shootings, pseudocommandos may make special efforts to communicate final messages to the public or news media. Such communications are rich sources of data about the motives and psychology of the pseudocommando. The field of forensic psycholinguistics may be applied in such cases to discern primary motivations, the presence of mental illness, and important individual nuances. Analysis of Mr. Cho's and Mr. Wong's final communications revealed important similarities and differences. It is hoped that careful analysis of final communications will ultimately lead to preventive measures through a better understanding of the pseudocommando's motivations and psychology.

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