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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. On average, 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.

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1. 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, Huizinga, & Ageton, 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,

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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, Fox, Roth, Mehta, & Harding, 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?

2. 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 (Caulfield, 2015; Gountas, Gountas, Reeves, & Moran, 2012; Parnaby & Sacco, 2004; Pinsky & Young, 2008; Twenge, 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2009; Sternheimer, 2011; Uhls & 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% 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, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 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, Fox, & Mazaik, 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 somewhat 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 Wilde (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?

2.1. 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, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski,