Indicators of Unhealthy Fame-Seeking and Attention-Seeking Among Public Mass Shooters and Active Shooters

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Abstract
Some psychologists consider attention seeking to be one of the most common goals of misbehavior by young people, and it can have many unhealthy consequences. Currently, however, so many Americans use the internet and social media to seek fame or attention that it may be difficult to know when intervention is necessary. This study examines the pre-attack statements and behaviors of 11 fame-seeking mass shooters and active shooters in the United States. The findings clarify which personal struggles and sources of pain these individuals commonly referenced, along with their frequency of making concerning internet/social media posts and having criminal records or histories of legal problems. Our results may guide Behavioral Intervention Teams and other concerned parties’ assessments of when someone poses a serious threat. We also provide specific recommendations for how to steer fame- and attention-seeking individuals in healthier directions, particularly in the early stages of intervention.

Keywords: mass shootings; fame seeking; attention seeking; assessment; intervention

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Introduction

There may be an almost instinctual tendency for some creatures that are suffering to act dramatically to get attention. This can be a literal “cry for help,” and is commonly observed among both human and non-human animals when they are very young. If they are hungry, cold, afraid, or in pain, they may cry out to get their parents’ attention, so that their suffering will be resolved. The same phenomenon is sometimes observed as these individuals get older, even if they are no longer dependent on their parents, and even if their attention-grabbing attempts are no longer appreciated. In some cases, this can lead to outright delinquent behavior, whereby the suffering individual would seemingly rather elicit a negative response (such as reprimand or punishment) than continue to be ignored. In fact, some psychologists consider attention seeking to be one of the most common goals of misbehavior, at least among young people (Christensen & Thomas, 1980; Gewirtz, 1956; Mellor, 2005).

Perhaps a modern extension of these tendencies is regularly witnessed in the United States, where some people appear so desperate for fame or attention that they are willing to say or do outrageous, immoral, or even illegal things to get it (Hawk et al., 2019; Lankford, 2016). This is not a new phenomenon. People have engaged in bad behavior to get attention for millennia, and the basic notion that “there is no such thing as bad publicity” dates back more than 100 years (Wilde, 1891 [2001]). However, multiple surveys and data sources suggest that Americans have never put a higher priority on getting fame and attention than they have in recent years (Lankford, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2007; Sternheimer, 2011; Twenge, 2014; Uhls & Greenfield, 2011). Furthermore, the distinction for some Americans between getting positive attention (fame) and negative attention (infamy) seems to be increasingly blurring (Lankford, 2016; Levin, Fox, & Mazaik, 2005).

One reason for these recent trends may be the influence of internet technology and social media (Pew Research Center, 2007). Although not everyone in the United States uses social media or seeks fame or attention, these technological advancements provide more efficient ways of connecting people, leading to both positive and negative results. The positive is that these advances theoretically “level the playing field” and make society more of a meritocracy. Anyone with a valuable idea or skill can publicize it, reach audiences all over the world in a matter of seconds, and presumably receive the acclaim and credit they deserve.

The negative is that it fosters fierce competition for attention (Rossi & Rubera, 2018). Self-promotion, which was once considered culturally distasteful, is now often encouraged as necessary to become professionally successful. And as the Pew Research Center summarizes (2007), Americans have become the “Look at Me” generation over the past 30 years. In this competitive context, some people exaggerate and lie about their personal attributes or accomplishments, or alter their photos and ensure they are only showing their audience the best versions of themselves (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). Social media also has a way of creating “micro-celebrities” or “Instafamous” people: individuals who are famous for doing things only related to the internet (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). And many social media users witness and learn first-hand that “acting out” in a deviant way — saying or doing something inflammatory, provocative, immoral, or even dangerous — often earns the deviant person lots of attention, while good behavior is commonly ignored.

This creates several big problems. First, psychological studies suggest that in general, people who prioritize extrinsic goals, such as fame, image, or money, are at a higher risk of struggling with anxiety, narcissism, and depression (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003; Lankford, 2016). Second, people who are desperate for fame or attention — or who care far too much about their “public” image — may be more susceptible to a range of unhealthy behaviors, both directed inward (e.g., eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide) and outward (e.g., cyberbullying, public aggression towards competitors, crime, and violence) (Hawk et al., 2019; Lankford, 2013, 2016; Maltby et al., 2001; Sheridan et al., 2007).

In the most extreme cases, the desperation for fame and attention has led to public mass shootings that killed innocent civilians. At some level, the fame-seeking perpetrators may be suffering and crying out for help, just like the young baby or animal that seeks attention from others. Previous research suggests that many fame-seeking mass shooters have indeed been attempting to compensate for feeling underappreciated, mistreated, victimized, or in pain, and some attackers have even admitted preferring infamy to obscurity (Lankford, 2016). However, these individuals become so desperate to escape their current situation that they are willing to murder innocent people — and often to die themselves — to achieve fame or infamy or create a notorious legacy after their deaths (Lankford, 2016; Madfis, 2017).

All this creates some extremely daunting challenges for Behavioral Intervention Teams and other concerned parties attempting to prevent these attacks. In our current climate, so many Americans use the internet and social media to seek fame or attention that it may
be difficult to know when an intervention is necessary. Furthermore, simply because much of this behavior may be unhealthy at some level does not mean it requires a formal response. After all, most Americans have at least a few unhealthy habits; that does not necessarily mean they pose a threat to themselves or others.

What specific signs can intervention teams or other concerned parties look for that indicate particularly unhealthy fame-seeking goals or behaviors, and that someone could potentially pose a serious threat? In this study, we attempt to provide some helpful answers. First, we summarize findings from our examination of 11 fame-seeking individuals who committed public mass shootings or active shootings in the United States, to clarify what some of the common warning signs were. Then, we provide specific recommendations for how intervention teams might be able to steer fame-seeking individuals in healthier directions, particularly in the early stages of interacting with students or other individuals of concern.

Method
Public “mass” and “active” shooters essentially refer to a similar perpetrator type who opens fire in a public place, such as a school, university, workplace, movie theater, church, or other location, and attempts to kill victims beyond a single target. The main difference between these two labels is that public “mass” shooters are traditionally defined as those who kill four or more victims, while there is no minimum threshold for “active” shooters (Fox & Levin, 2015). However, there is significant overlap between the psychology and behavior of these perpetrators, because many active shooters who killed two or three victims also seriously wounded others, and thus intended to kill significantly more — just like mass shooters.

Our study aimed to identify potential warning signs and concerning behaviors among individuals who sought fame or attention and completed a public mass shooting or active shooting. While there are many examples of these types of attackers seeking fame and attention, we examined only clear-cut examples in which perpetrators made direct statements about having these motives. Conducting a study of these particular offenders creates a high standard (Lankford, 2016), with the benefit that there is no subjectivity about their interest in fame or attention seeking, as they openly admitted it in verbal or written statements.

After conducting a preliminary analysis of data to identify cases for our sample, we selected 11 individuals who met the fame-seeking or attention-seeking criteria, based on their own pre-attack statements. Examples include the 2014 Isla Vista mass murderer, who wrote in his manifesto “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” (Rodger, n.d., p. 42); and one of the 1999 Columbine shooters, who expected films would be made about their attack and stated, “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 2014, p. 4). Demographically, our sample consisted of all males between the ages of 17 and 26; the majority were white/Caucasian, but several came from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Of the 11, seven attacked at schools or educational facilities, two attacked at places of business, one attacked at a public event, and one had mixed locations (a combination of home, school, and a place of business). They all struck within the United States.

To identify potential warning signs and concerning behaviors, we first examined open source public data, consisting of verbal and written statements made by the mass shooters and active shooters before their attacks. Sources of data included journals, manifestos, YouTube videos, computer documents, suicide notes, cellphone videos, etc. We also examined the public record for information about the behavior of each perpetrator. An overall profile of each individual was developed, examining psychological characteristics, social characteristics, family dynamics, and any important leakage behavior, primarily using psycholinguistic information. This included exploring relationships between linguistic behavior and psychological processes. This process of psycholinguistic analysis was based on basic linguistic theory (Dixon, 1977), which involves analysis in an attempt to determine psychological meaning behind the words used by individuals. However, in many cases, the perpetrators’ words essentially spoke for themselves, because they were candid about their suffering and personal struggles.

For each perpetrator, we coded whether or not he made pre-attack statements that referenced or exhibited feelings of (1) narcissism, (2) loneliness, (3) abandonment/rejection, (4) depression, (5) suicide ideation, (6) conflict with a family member, (7) failure with love/romance/sex, (8) anger against members of society, and/or (9) having violent role models. We also considered the following questions when examining each perpetrator’s behavior: (10) did he have a criminal record or history of legal problems, (11) did he make concerning internet or social media posts, and (12) did he have a personal connection with his attack location prior to the incident?

It is important to note that many individuals who make statements about some of these feelings or exhibit a few of these behaviors...
may never go on to commit a dangerous attack. However, these factors may be dangerous when combined and/or when mixed with other individual tendencies, environmental conditions, and precipitating events. After we present our results in the following section, we will provide an in-depth discussion of the applicability of these findings to preventing harmful and potentially criminal behavior.

Results

Evidence of Narcissism in Offenders’ Pre-Attack Statements

Narcissism and fame seeking/attention seeking often go hand in hand (Bushman, 2018). When examining this sample of mass shooters and active shooters, that relationship was a common finding. Nine out of the 11 perpetrators made statements that indicated some narcissist tendencies or traits. However, when do healthy levels of self-confidence cross over into unhealthy narcissism? Several researchers have examined harmful narcissism, which can manifest as vulnerable or grandiose (Duval, Ensink, Normandin, Sharp, & Fonagy, 2018; Friedemann, Tolmacz, & Doron, 2016).

Vulnerable narcissism is expressed as someone having emotional cognitive reactivity. For instance, an individual might display hostility towards others online, and in effect be a cyberbully. The 2014 Isla Vista shooter is one example. He was known for frequenting online bodybuilding forums and attacking others based on their looks and racial identity. This form of narcissism is thought to be a result of difficulty with self-regulation and functioning, and may be rooted in some level of insecurity, as was also evident in this shooter’s manifesto (Rodger, n.d.).

Grandiose narcissism presents as hubris, devaluation of others, and self-focus (Duval, et al., 2018; Friedemann, et al., 2016). Using the 18-year-old Columbine shooter (E.H.) as an example, we can see examples of grandiose narcissism. For instance, he often recounted being able to lie and manipulate people while feeling no remorse:

I lie a lot. Almost constant [sic], and to everybody, just to keep my own ass out of the water... Let’s see, what are some big lies I have told; “yeah I stopped smoking;” “for doing it not for getting caught,” “no I haven’t been making more bombs,” “no I wouldn’t do that,” and of course, countless of other ones, and yeah I know that I hate liars and I am one myself, oh fucking well. It’s ok if I am a hypocrite, but no one else, because I am higher than you people, no matter what you say if you disagree I would shoot you (Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, 1999, JC-01-026013).

Given the explicit threat at the end of this quote, there is no question that the threat posed by this narcissistic perpetrator was extremely concerning.

Additional Feelings that Offenders Referenced or Exhibited in Pre-Attack Statements

We also examined other feelings that the 11 fame-seeking mass/active shooters referenced or exhibited in their written or verbal statements prior to attacking. We then calculated the frequency with which these issues appeared, to determine commonalities among these fame seekers (see Table 1). Each factor is presented below, along with specific examples, so that we could provide readers with a sense of exactly how some perpetrators expressed their thoughts.

As expected, these fame-seeking attackers commonly referenced their psychological struggles and pain. Particularly concerning issues among this sample were references to loneliness, abandonment, rejection, depression, and suicide. All of these perpetrators referenced suicide, all mentioned being alone or lonely, eight out of 11 (73 percent) used language that was indicative of depression, and six out of 11 (55 percent) mentioned abandonment or rejection. Regarding the frequency of their suicide references, it is also worth emphasizing that eight out of the 11 shooters ultimately committed suicide at the conclusion of their attacks.

An especially illustrative example comes from the 22-year-old male who killed six civilians and came close to assassinating U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona in 2011. Several months prior to carrying out his attack, he used social media to allude to his plans, posting the following on his MySpace account:

“WOW! I’m glad i didn’t kill myself. I’ll see you on National T.v! This is a foreshadow... why doesn’t anyone talk to me?... I HAVE THIS HUGE GOAL AT THE END OF MY LIFE: 165 Rounds fired in a minute!” (Loughner, 2010, p. 38).

He also posted, “I’ll kill a fucking police officer and commit suicide in a crowd with a bomb!” and “I’m dreaming of a suicidal nightmare” (Loughner, 2010, p. 39). In these quotes, the shooter acknowledges his suicide ideation and self-destructive desires, while also referencing his social frustration with not having anyone to talk to, his desire to become famous by being on national television, and his interest in committing a violent attack that will harm others.

Most perpetrators also wrote about issues with their family relationships, with 10 out of 11 (91 percent) expressing a conflict
with a specific family member. Of these, five attackers specifically mentioned their mom or mother, and one perpetrator actually murdered his mother prior to his mass shooting. Five others wrote or spoke about their fathers, and one murdered his father before launching his public attack.

One example of a perpetrator who discussed family conflicts is the 2014 Isla Vista shooter, who was jealous of his brother to the point that he had considered murdering him. As he wrote:

> It is very unfair how some boys are able to live such pleasurable lives while I never had any taste of it, and now it has been confirmed to me that my little brother will become one of them. He will become a popular kid who gets all the girls. Girls will love him. He will become one of my enemies. That was the day that I decided I would have to kill him on the Day of Retribution. (Rodger, n.d., p. 128).

Fortunately, this offender did not end up harming his brother, but he did go on to kill six other innocent victims.

When we examined these offenders’ setbacks and failures, all of them also mentioned failures in love, romance, or sexual pursuits. For example, the second Columbine shooter (D.K.) referred to his despair over unrequited love:

> The one who I thought was my true love, [redacted] is not. Just a shell of what I want the most... the meanest trick was played on me [redacted] a fake love... she in reality doesn't give a good fuck about me... doesn't even know me... I have no happiness, no ambitions, no friends, & no LOVE!!! (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, 1999, JC-001-26396).

In some cases, the perpetrators’ struggles over general loneliness, romantic failures, and sexual frustration may have overlapped. Each of these struggles may have exacerbated their feelings of inadequacy, and each may have also fueled their desires for fame. Young people, in particular, often subscribe to the fantasy that becoming famous will instantly grant them as many friends and romantic or sexual partners as they could possibly want.

Another finding was that, overall, all 11 offenders openly expressed anger or hostility towards members of society or societal groups on social media or in some other public forum. Comments included anger or hostility towards legal authorities (e.g., police officers, the government, etc.), hate for humanity as a whole, anger about society being hedonistic or evil, and anger towards specific racial or social groups. The Virginia Tech attacker is one perpetrator who made very hateful remarks. In his case, they appeared in a video he mailed to NBC News:

> Congratulations. You have succeeded in extinguishing my life. Vandalizing my heart wasn't enough for you. Raping my soul wasn't enough for you. Committing emotional sodomy on me wasn't enough for you. Every single second wasted on your wanton hedonism and menacing sadism could have been used to prevent today (Cho, 2007, p. 6).

In this quote, the shooter actually frames his anger against others as justified, because he perceives himself to have been victimized. This appears somewhat common among attackers of this type (Lankford, 2018).

When examining the perpetrators’ writings for signs of copycat behavior, we found that nine out of 11 discussed a specific
violent role model, with five offenders who attacked after Columbine specifically mentioning the Columbine shooters. For instance, the 2006 Orange High School shooter was particularly infatuated with one of the Columbine shooters, so much that he dressed like him, named a gun the same name as that shooter used for his gun, and put pictures in his journal of that shooter. He wrote that the Columbine shooter “is just so good-looking. I can’t believe he couldn’t get a date for the prom” (Langman, 2018, p. 216) and that, “today I have [given] Arlene a complete makeover. I turned her into Eric’s shotgun. I sawed off the barrel and stock of the shotgun with a hacksaw... Arlene looks so beautiful now... Everything is falling into place at last” (Castillo, 2006, p. 5).

In another example, the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter made many online comments about past mass murderers and gave his thoughts about their crimes. He even created a spreadsheet with 500 mass murderers, who he ranked and scored depending on the number of people they killed. He also wrote on a message board that, “Serial killers are lame. Everyone knows that mass murderers are the cool kids” (Lanza, 2011), and “People who kill have many reasons and motivations, they are motivated by perverse urges which overcome them. They are sick in the head that is for sure, but they are not evil” (Lanza, 2010).

Offenders’ Pre-Attack Behavior
As shown in Table 2, of the 11 attackers studied here, 64 percent had documented prior criminal records or legal problems. These problems included incidents in which campus police or other law enforcement officers were involved, and while some led to criminal convictions and punishments, others resulted in less serious consequences. As one example, the 2011 Tucson, Arizona shooter was suspended from school for making disturbing YouTube videos and engaging in other concerning behavior. Administrators removed him from school, with his return being conditional on receiving a mental health evaluation, which he refused. Prior to his dismissal, the shooter also yelled at a professor and asked if he was getting paid to brainwash students (National Threat Assessment Center, 2015).

All the perpetrators in the sample also made verbal or written statements about violence before attacking, with 73 percent posting about violence on the internet or social media. The most common platform for this “leakage” was YouTube (45 percent of cases). Four of 11 offenders made videos but never uploaded them to YouTube; eight kept a form of communication that was either typewritten or handwritten and not on social media; and three posted photos on Instagram. For instance, the 2018 Parkland, Florida shooter gave indications of his eventual attack on social media. On September 24, 2017, someone actually reported him to the FBI and to YouTube for leaving a comment stating “I’m [sic] going to be a professional school shooter” (Goldman & Mazzei, 2018). The individual who had left the FBI tip claims that law enforcement never followed through on investigating it.

Additionally, we found that all 11 of the offenders had prior attachments or connections to their targets (e.g., they were a current student, expelled student, employee, or their parent worked at the school, *etc.*). This may help explain why they attacked at those specific locations.

Discussion and Recommendations
As noted earlier in this paper, not all individuals who make the previously discussed statements or display the aforementioned behaviors will commit a mass shooting or active shooting. Additionally, not all individuals who commit these attacks will necessarily exhibit clear signs of posing a threat. What we can do, however, is focus on the commonalities among these offenders and use them to help identify when fame seeking and attention seeking could potentially escalate to something extremely dangerous.

Table 2. Frequency of Factors in Offenders’ Pre-Attack Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Connection with Attack Location</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made Concerning Internet or Social Media Posts</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Record or History of Legal Problems</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 11 mass shooters and active shooters who attacked in the United States and directly mentioned seeking fame or attention as a motive.
This study found that a high proportion of fame-seeking mass shooters and active shooters made pre-attack statements referencing or exhibiting feelings of narcissism, loneliness, abandonment/rejection, depression, suicide, conflict with a family member, failure with love/romance/sex, anger against members of society, and/or having violent role models. Many also had criminal records or histories of legal problems and made concerning internet or social media posts. Finally, all these individuals had personal connections with their attack locations prior to the incident.

**Assessing Warning Signs for At-Risk Individuals**

In light of these findings, what combination of warning signs should Behavioral Intervention Teams and other concerned parties look for when assessing potentially dangerous fame-seeking or attention-seeking behavior? And how many of these warning signs need to appear before there is sufficient reason to believe that someone may pose a serious threat? When making these types of assessments, one approach is to use a checklist. By counting the total number of warning signs for each person of concern, it may be possible to better gauge the likelihood that the person poses a threat. This is based on the premise that the more warning signs which appear in a given case, the greater the risk. In other words, the more “smoke,” the higher the likelihood of “fire.” In Tables 3 and 4, we provide a sense of what this checklist approach would look like for the 11 fame-seeking mass shooters and active shooters in this study.

In these tables, we listed 11 possible warning signs. (The 12th factor we studied — whether perpetrators had personal connections to their attack location, is not an indicator of whether someone is likely to attack, although it may inform where someone might attack). As these tables reveal, the number of warning signs that these mass shooters and active shooters exhibited varied, but all perpetrators showed at least seven of them. The average perpetrator displayed nine warning signs. Whenever possible, the aforementioned approach to documenting warning signs should be supplemented with further information that could shed light on a given individual’s current feelings and future intentions. One potential source of that information is social media, where people often make public posts that reveal their thoughts and plans. However, comprehensively monitoring social media can be challenging, and has proved difficult even for large corporations such as Facebook and Twitter. Nevertheless, social media can be very useful for providing indications of when someone’s fame-seeking or attention-seeking desires have taken a dark turn.

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**Table 3. Total Number of Concerning Statements, Traits, and Behaviors Among Mass Shooters and Active Shooters who Sought Fame (Pt. 1)**

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narcissism</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandonment/Rejection</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with a Family Member</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure with Love/Romance/sex</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger against Members of Society</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Role Models</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Record or History of Legal Problems</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerning Internet or Social Media Posts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
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</table>
The 2018 Parkland shooter is a clear example where further social media investigations could have clarified the nature of an impending threat. The shooter had started cutting himself on Snapchat (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016, p. 2), was posting photos of dead animals on Instagram (Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, 2018), and proclaimed on YouTube that he wanted to be the next professional school shooter (Goldman & Mazzei, 2018).

While some boys may show more violent tendencies than girls, understanding their behavior in context of other life events can also be helpful, and if someone can “connect the dots,” that may provide an informed assessment of the threat. In the case of the Parkland shooter, it was not only his social media posts; he had also lost both his parents, been abusive towards his mother, gotten kicked out of school for fighting, and made two suicide attempts. Some of his social media behavior could be interpreted as a “cry for help,” while also shedding light on the growing risk of him becoming a fame-seeking mass shooter.

It should also be emphasized that further information about at-risk individuals can often be directly obtained by speaking with the individuals themselves. Although this study analyzed pre-attack statements that mass shooters and active shooters made in journals, videos, online posts, and by other means, we did not directly interview these perpetrators (all of whom were deceased or incarcerated). Psychologists, counselors, Behavioral Intervention Teams, and other concerned parties may be able to gain a fuller sense of an individual’s struggles with loneliness, depression, failure with love/romance/sex, and so on, simply through open conversation. That information could provide an important supplement to the types of warning signs we have analyzed here.

Overall, these findings may provide a useful guide for those attempting to estimate risk. However, it should be noted that if an individual shows fewer warning signs, there could still be significant risk of dangerous behavior. In particular, someone who makes statements about suicide or who makes concerning online posts about committing violence should be taken very seriously.
seriously, even if those are the only signs that have been observed. Leakage of suicidal and homicidal intent is very common among this population, and if someone sees concerning signs, attempts should be made to contact the individual directly, and/or connect that individual with a crisis intervention program (Berryman et al., 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Cohen, Johansson, Kaati, & Mork, 2014; Pescara-Kovach & Raleigh, 2017). Then, further assessments can be made to help determine if the individual has a plan to harm themselves or others, and whether the person has the means to do so (e.g., potentially dangerous medication or weapons).

Of course, in the most extreme cases where people pose imminent threats to themselves or others, serious intervention is required. Depending on the case, some individuals may need to be arrested by law enforcement or temporarily held for mental health reasons (Lankford, 2018; Lankford, Adkins, & Madfis, 2019; and Silver, Simons & Craun, 2018). In other cases, extreme risk protection orders may be warranted to prevent those individuals from possessing or purchasing firearms (Giffords Law Center, 2019).

Steering At-Risk Individuals in Healthier Directions

In less extreme cases, or in situations where an at-risk individual is identified at an earlier stage, there may be opportunities to steer that person in a healthier, more positive direction. For instance, sometimes medication can make a significant difference in helping someone feel better and become safer, especially if that individual is suffering from depression or other psychiatric conditions (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2019), which appeared relatively common among this sample of perpetrators. Of course, medical intervention also requires active monitoring of the individual, close attention to potential side effects, ongoing outcome tracking, and plans for scenarios in which there is no improvement or only partial improvement (Cheung et al., 2018).

In addition, many of the concerning issues we identified in this study can be treated with evidence-based practices in therapeutic settings. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2019) recommends cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), behavioral activation (BA), the cognitive behavioral analysis system of psychotherapy (CBASP), or dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), depending on the specific underlying mental health struggles that may be contributing to an individual’s suicidal thoughts or intent. In some cases, only three to four months of sessions are required to have a major impact on risk reduction (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2019).

Furthermore, this type of treatment can potentially help alleviate many sources of pain in these individuals’ lives, not just one. For example, some forms of therapy will help reduce suicide risk, while also treating depression, substance abuse problems, trauma, and family conflicts (Diamond, Russon, & Levy, 2016). In some cases, family members actually participate in therapy sessions, which may help to strengthen social and protective bonds. Additionally, psychotherapy has even been shown to help people who struggle with narcissism to (1) forge better social relationships, (2) understand their unhealthy desires for aggressive competition, (3) become more tolerant of criticism or perceived rejection, and (4) release their need to pursue unattainable or excessively lofty goals (Mayo Clinic, 2019). This could significantly reduce their likelihood of engaging in fame-seeking violence.

In addition to these recommendations, we also want to emphasize a few specific strategies that may be particularly helpful for the type of fame-seeking individuals we studied here. As we noted earlier, fame- and attention-seeking behavior does not seem like the best path to a happy or healthy life (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Maltby et al., 2001; Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003; and Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Psychological studies suggest that focusing on extrinsic goals, such as fame or self-image, is associated with higher risk of depression, anxiety, and narcissism (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; and Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003).

Additionally, some forms of attention seeking on social media are associated with feelings of rejection and need for reassurance (Sheldon & Newman, 2019), and celebrity worship appears most appealing to those who are depressed, anxious, and socially dysfunctional (Maltby et al., 2001). Therefore, we suggest encouraging at-risk individuals to pursue healthier interests, such as refocusing on self-directed goals and endeavors, and becoming more altruistic. For example, rather than make YouTube videos focusing on superficial concepts such as one’s image, an at-risk individual could be encouraged to post videos about something they may be good at, in hope of teaching others to learn a new hobby or hone a valuable skill. This can promote an environment that fosters learning and shared experiences, while fitting with the individual’s desire for attention, but in a healthier and more socially generous way.

It might also be possible to redirect some of these at-risk individuals to replace their violent role models with healthier sources of influence and inspiration. The priority should be put on learning from people who have accomplished something genuinely
worthwhile. Healthy role models could include public figures who have received significant attention or even become famous, as well accomplished local leaders or community role models. There are many seeming “average” people who have forged satisfying lives — and established the types of social connections these at-risk individuals often crave — without ever needing to become pop-culture celebrities.

If it is indeed the case that many fame-seeking mass shooters and active shooters are compensating for feeling ignored, underappreciated, or in pain, then it is worth trying to alleviate some of the underlying problems that lead to their desperate desires for attention. In addition to the applicable psychiatric and psychological intervention strategies, helping people who feel lonely find friends, helping people who feel loveless find love, and helping people who feel depressed or suicidal find something meaningful to live for may further enhance the likelihood that we prevent a future attack.

References


