

# Understanding the Newtown Shooter

by

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The recent release of further information about the Newtown shooter has produced the usual expressions of incredulity as to why his horrendous acts occurred with “inexplicable” and “motive remains mystery” being the reported sentiment. Yet while the specific act—the Newtown school massacre—could not have been predicted, the murder of Adam Lanza’s mother, the mass killings which followed and his suicide, can be easily understood using long accepted psychological knowledge.

All people have psychological abilities: the ability to control their thinking and their behavior; the ability to develop a sense of who they are or “sense of self”; the ability to tolerate and use feelings in making decisions; and the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy or to “test reality.” While the germs of these capacities are innate, they require an adequate parenting to thrive. In this process the mother, or mothering figure who could be male, is most important during the first two years of a child’s development while the father’s role increases during the third year. He enables the child to break free from the symbiotic (associated) relationship with their mother and move into the larger world outside the family.

This process ordinarily occurs without a hitch and as easily as a child learns to speak their native language. But if the parenting was inadequate, not “good enough,” weaknesses may develop in these basic psychological abilities (ego capacities). However this is not a black/white affair for only some abilities may be inadequate. Thus the young child can have difficulty learning or interacting with peers, and later fail to fulfill the tasks essential for adult functioning: appropriate separation from parents; exploring intimacy through dating; and the making of realistic educational and vocational choices.

These failures cause anxiety because of psychological conflict and fears; and hopelessness and depression because of the sensed limitations and depression of feelings. Self-esteem plummets since self-esteem is, largely, the mind’s (ego’s) assessment of its structural limitations which, in some of these youth, can be considerable.

Then, like Lanza, the young person may attempt to reduce their anxiety by, unconsciously and without deliberation, using the obsessive-compulsive ego defense which creates rigid routines\*. Or, like Lanza, they may isolate themselves to avoid viewing healthier, happy people and increase their distress. Or, like Lanza, they may attempt to control family members, being unable to manage the psychological war going on inside of them.

As the young adult’s frustration grows, so does their rage. And if unleashed, what target is more understandable than their parent(s) who, though unintentionally, contributed to the tragedy of their life? Moreover, lacking an authentic personality since this requires insight and the capacity to tolerate feelings, they may adopt the false identity of warrior, delusional though this is. Thus they can achieve the fame, and infamy, of a mass murderer rather than remaining just another of

society's failures. The suicide which often follows reflects self-hatred and the life-long feeling of being unworthy of life.

The publicized attempts to explain these killings using such Diagnostic Manual (DSM-IV) terms as Asperger's disorder or schizophrenia are fallacious since, being behaviorally based, they lack etiology, a defined causation. These efforts result from the popular fallacy that to name something is to understand it, or the basic psychological principle which applies to everyone but can be too frightening to accept: that the unconscious is very powerful and one must respect its power.

\*Connecticut's final report on Lanza and the Newtown shooting, which was published in late December, 2013, revealed interesting facts: that Lanza changed his socks twenty times a day, this and his other rigid routines keeping his mother frantically busy; and that he killed his mother the night before they were to briefly separate, he to stay in an RV trailer while she made the house ready for sale in anticipation of their move to another state. Thus even a temporary breakage of the maternal symbiosis in a fragile, highly disturbed adult can be as traumatic as the threat of separation in a conflicted marital relationship, when murders are not uncommon. The report also stated that Lanza's mother rejected suggestions that her son required mental health treatment.