

Cognitive Patterns of Social Information Processing in School Shooters

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Introduction

Popular news broadcasting networks today will give the impression that school rampage shootings have dramatically increased in the United States over recent years. Whether this impression is accurate (see Capellan & Gomez, 2016; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Rocque, 2012 for discussion), the fact remains that each new tragedy brings with it fear, panic, and uncertainty. Why do these tragedies occur and what can be done to stop them? Research on school shootings is beginning to provide insights regarding the cognitive patterns of school shooters and how these patterns influence their decision to kill.

Social Information Processing

- ❖ The Social Information Processing model provides a foundation for understanding the cognitive processing patterns of school shooters.
- ❖ According to the reformulated model of social information processing, children go through 6 stages of interpreting and responding to information taken in from their social environment (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- ❖ They receive a variety of social cues and process these social cues through their own database of experiences.
- ❖ In the first two stages of the reformulated model, children take in situational and internal cues from their environment and past experiences, encode these cues, and then use a variety of interpretational processes to make sense of them (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- ❖ Once a child has interpreted a cue using their available database, they move into stage 3 where they choose a goal (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- ❖ Researchers have hypothesized that children use their previous tendencies and goal orientations in their current social situation to revise their goals and construct new ones when they encounter immediate social stimuli (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Social Information Processing

- ❖ In stage 4 of the model, children begin to construct potential behavioral responses to the encountered social stimuli (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- ❖ In stage 5, children use a variety of factors to make their final decision including the outcome they wish to achieve, their level of confidence in their ability to execute the action, and the perceived appropriateness of their response (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- ❖ In the last stage of the model, children enact the decided upon action.

Aggressive Adaptation

- ❖ In stages 1 and 2 of the model, researchers have found that aggressive children often interpret the actions of others as being more intentionally hostile than do their non-aggressive peers (Crick & Dodge, 1996).
- ❖ In aggressive children, goals chosen during stage 3 have been found to reflect instrumental gains more than relational gains, meaning, for example, that aggressive children would choose to take a toy from another child rather than building a friendship with that child (Crick & Dodge, 1996).
- ❖ Each stage of the model that follows is then colored by the lens of their interpretation and desired goal, leading aggressive children to often make decisions that are less outwardly focused and more inwardly satisfying.

Cognitive Patterns

- ❖ Adolescents who exhibit aggressive behaviors and a tendency to endorse instrumental rather than relational social goals may be more likely to interpret their social environment as threatening to their social goals, leading them to more aggressive forms of behavior.
- ❖ In fact, many school shooters are described as being loners and socially isolated, reflecting their lack of desire, or more realistically their lack of understanding, of establishing and pursuing relational social goals (Capellan & Gomez, 2017; Declercq & Audenaert, 2011; Meloy, Hempel, Gray, Mohandie, Shiva, & Richards, 2004).
- ❖ Researchers have found that individuals who kill are not only aggressive; they also demonstrate patterns of paranoid and delusional thinking (Declercq & Audenaert, 2011; Dutton, White, & Fogarty, 2013; Knoll & Meloy, 2014; Lankford, 2016).
- ❖ These paranoid and delusional thinking patterns can color an adolescent's interpretation of their social environment in very dark and twisted ways.
- ❖ For some school shooters, the cues and information they used to make sense of their social environment and to make their decision to kill is revealed in the videos, manifestos, and/or diaries they leave behind.

An Example from Columbine High

- ❖ Eric Harris, one of the two shooters at Columbine High School, left behind very gruesome and terrifying accounts of his feelings toward individuals at his school and his intense desire to get revenge (Dutton, White, & Fogarty, 2013).
- ❖ His diaries reflected the thoughts of an adolescent obsessed with the alleged mistreatment he faced, although the mistreatment was not supported by any identified evidence (Dutton, White, & Fogarty, 2013).
- ❖ He seemingly engaged in paranoid and delusional thinking patterns that led him to believe a school shooting was an effective and viable means for him to alleviate the pain and suffering he felt he was experiencing.

Conclusions

- ❖ Through the lens of social information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Crick & Dodge, 1996), it becomes clear that displays of aggression combined with paranoid or delusional tendencies leads to an interpretation by an adolescent that killing is an acceptable response to perceived slight by people in the individual's life.
- ❖ School shootings are not simply random and senseless acts aimed at drawing attention to the shooter. These tragedies are most often highly organized and symbolic to the perpetrators (Madfis, 2016).
- ❖ The shootings become either a representation of their inner turmoil, revenge for a perceived slight, an attempt to mimic a previous tragedy for fame and glory, or more commonly any combination of these reasons (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Lankford, 2016).
- ❖ The importance of understanding what causes some individuals to commit these atrocities is to find ways to prevent them and/or identify the individuals most prone to commit them.

